NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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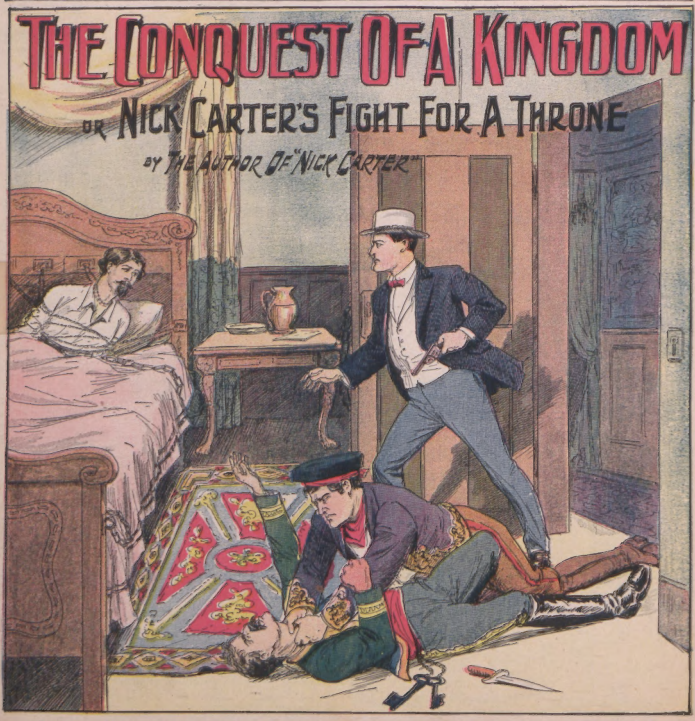
THE CONQUEST OF A KINGDOM

OR NICK CARTER'S FIGHT FOR A THRONE

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"



Instantly Nick and Vigo together hurled themselves against the door, knocking down the guard inside. Vigo leaped forward and threw himself upon the prostrate man.

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THE CONQUEST OF A KINGDOM;

OR,

NICK CARTER'S FIGHT FOR A THRONE.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

A MYSTERY SURROUNDS A KING.

Five persons were seated around the table in the library of Nick Carter's house. They were: Nick Carter, in person; Chick, his chief assistant; General Morales Calabria, commander-in-chief of the army of Terra del Corazon, and also erstwhile acting chief of the secret service of that country; Colonel Eulogio Calabria, the general's son; and Princess Nerdinia, sister to the young king.

The five had been for several hours engaged in consultation concerning the affairs of the little kingdom, and during that time the old general had related to the detective and his assistant the story of a conspiracy by which the young king, Juan II., had been forced to become a mere puppet in the hands of one General Fernando.

It is not necessary here to repeat all the story as it was related by the old general.

The statement with which he concluded his recital is, however, suggestive. It was:

"That, I think, Mr. Carter, about sums up all I know about the affair. Whatever has been done, has been accomplished in the dark. The conspirators, with General Fernando at their head, have worked in secret. They have accomplished their ends in a manner much too subtle and dexterous for an old worn-out soldier like myself to have followed.

"You are aware, sir, that I served the grandfather of the present king; also that I served his father and him also. Juan II., from his cradle, has been almost like a son to me; he has ever reposed the utmost confidence in me, and he did so up to the last moment of our relations.

"Then, without warning, I was suddenly refused an audience with him. When I besought his majesty to admit me to his presence, I was coldly told by his serving man that I would be summoned when wanted.

"The next indignity came when an order of the king, under his private seal, deprived me of the command of the army and took away from me all the authority that had hitherto been vested in me. Next, my insignia of office was taken away; my sword was demanded—and when I laid in wait for his majesty and so succeeded in intercepting him in one of the private walks through the garden of the palace, he looked upon me coldly when I pleaded with him; he turned his back upon me; he called to his guard and had me placed under arrest; I was sent to prison, from which I only escaped to come here to you, remembering that once you had been friendly to my king and my country.

"When I arrive here I find that the conspiracy has progressed even farther than I had believed. I find my princess here, and that she and my own son have also been made victims of this awful conspiracy."*

"Mr. Carter, there is an awful mystery in this affair; a mystery which I have not the wit to solve.

"To me, my king did not seem to be my king at all. I saw him, and the face and features were his; I heard him speak, and the voice was his; I looked into his eyes, and they seemed to be his eyes; but there was nothing else about him that seemed at all like my king.

"What has happened to him? What has come to the young man who has ever professed to love me, and who has shown that love and affection in a thousand ways, that he should suddenly turn from me? What has come to him, who has always shown the utmost devotion to his sister, that he should suddenly turn from her, and maliciously condemn her to a fate worse than death, by forcing her into a marriage with the evil-minded, evil-bodied, evil-intentioned scoundrel who is the Prince of Herznovia?

"I looked upon the man and saw my king—and yet my heart tells me that he is not my king; and now, in his name—as he was—in the name of my princess who sits here with us, and adds her choice to mine, in the name of my country and of the people there, I beseech you to come with us to Corazon; I beg you to help me to set matters straight, or at least to solve this mystery which overshadows us.

"I am an old man, Mr. Carter—but my heart is young. "I love my country, and my king, and my king's sister. If wrong has been done, I would see that wrong righted.

"What I cannot perform, in the way of actual service, you may trust my son to do for me. He has already satisfied you of his loyalty to his princess; and, therefore, in his name, in my own, and in the name of her royal highness, who sits beside you, I ask you, Will you return with us to Corazon? Will you undertake to lead this fight for a throne?"

As the old man ceased speaking, the princess leaned forward in her chair, and reaching out her right hand, rested it gently upon the detective's arm.

"I ask this favor of you, Mr. Carter, not as a royal princess, but as *a woman*," she said, in her low, sweet voice. "Will you go with us to Corazon?"

The detective turned his head so that he faced her, and smiled into her eyes.

"Yes, princess," he said. "I will go with you."

She rose in her place, and there was a glad light in her eyes as she turned and faced the others.

"Hear me," she said, "for this is the last order I shall give. I ask of all of you that it be obeyed to the letter."

The old general and his son bowed their heads in token that they would heed what she said to them; and then she continued:

"From this moment I command that there shall be no degrees of rank or royalty between us. To you all I will be merely Nerdinia, and so I prefer that you should address me. To Nick Carter, every degree of authority now held by any of us, is this moment surrendered. He is, henceforth, in absolute authority here. General, do you understand me?"

The old general slowly rose from his chair and bowed to Nick Carter, saluting him gravely as he said:

"I salute you, sir, as my superior in authority."

"And you, Eulogio?" demanded the princess, of the general's son.

He rose in his place and copied in word and gesture, the act and speech of his father; and when that was done, the princess again turned to the detective.

"Now, Mr. Carter," she said, "we await your orders."

"They will be very brief," replied Nick, smiling. "We will adjourn at once to the dining-room, where dinner has been waiting at least an hour. To-morrow, we sail for Corazon. For the present, that is all."

* * * * * * *

That evening the party was again assembled in the library, and the princess turned with a bright smile to the detective.

"Mr. Carter," she said, "I find that there is some small affair of shopping that I wish to do. The ship which is to take us away from this country, sails too early in the day for me to accomplish anything in the morning. Do you think that, inasmuch as I have resolved myself into an ordinary woman and have ceased, for the time at least, to be hedged around with royalty, that I may venture upon the streets to-night—with an escort, of course?"

"I am afraid, Nerdinia," replied the detective, "that you would find all the stores closed against you."

"I have already consulted with Chick," she said brightly. "I have taken him into my confidence. I have told him what I wish to purchase. He has offered to escort me; and——"

*Read No. 485 of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY, "The Veiled Princess."

"If that is the case, I think you need not hesitate to do your errands."

"Thank you. Eulogio will accompany us, also; that will leave you and the general to discuss your plans without our interference."

"All right," said Nick, laughing. "You seem to have made all the arrangements before you asked permission; but with a double escort such as you will have——"

"You think that I will be quite safe, do you not?"

"Quite."

It was plain that not one of them ever thought that there would be the slightest danger incurred by the princess venturing out—and certainly no thought of anything of the kind occurred to Nick when he knew that young Colonel Calabria and Chick would both be with her; and so it happened that a few moments later the three left the house, and thus left the old general and Nick alone in the library.

And it was not many minutes before they adjourned to Nick's study—for that was the one place in the house where Nick Carter most cared to be.

"General," he said to the aged officer, as soon as they were settled in their places, "there are a number of questions I wish to ask you. I had thought that I would defer them until we were on the ocean, but there seems to be no better time than this one."

"I am ready to reply to all that you will ask, to the best of my ability," replied the general.

"It is chiefly about one remark that you made in reference to the king," said the detective.

"Yes."

"You said, 'I looked upon the man and I saw my king; and yet my heart told me that it was not my king.'"

"Yes."

"It seems to me that that remark requires some further explanation."

"But, Mr. Carter, that is the puzzle; that is the mystery. I cannot explain it."

"You saw your king?"

"Yes."

"You heard him speak?"

"Yes."

"You believed that you had seen his features and heard his voice?"

"Yes."

"But, if I understand you at all, all the time that you believed you saw and heard him, there was an inner voice within you which kept saying to you, 'That is not the man.' Is that the idea?"

"That is exactly it, sir."

"Have you an idea, then, that the man whom you did see and hear was an impostor?"

"No; I cannot believe that, else I would have said so frankly at the beginning."

"You think, then, that the man was your king, but that he was under some unnatural influence foreign to himself?"

"That is the only way in which I can explain it at all."

"I am quite well aware, general, that hypnotism is more of a bugbear than a reality; but has it occurred to you at all that such might be an explanation of the mystery?"

"I will admit that it has occurred to me; but I must also assert that I do not believe it is the correct explanation."

"Nor I. But what——"

"I would rather accept the other suggestion you have made, than that one."

"That the man is an impostor?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe that is possible, and that you could have been so thoroughly deceived by his appearance, and voice, and manner?"

"I cannot say that *I believe* it; and yet what other explanation is there? I can think of none."

"There is only one other."

"And what is that?"

"That it was really the king himself, but that his mind has been so adroitly poisoned against you and others, that he acted as he did toward you from choice."

"No, sir, *no!* I will never believe that."

"Then what are we to believe?"

"Anything rather than that. We are to believe that there is a mystery. That the king is dead—has been murdered, and an impostor put in his place, if you will. Anything but that the man I saw was the king, and that he was in his right mind, anything but that!"

CHAPTER II.

THE NIGHT ATTACK.

"Tell me again of that last interview you had with him; that one in the royal garden, to which you have only referred in part."

"There is no more to that than I have already told," replied the general. "It was really no interview at all. He scarcely spoke to me, and then only with averted eyes."

"Nevertheless, tell me about it."

"I have already mentioned how I had been ill treated."

"Yes."

"My shoulder-straps had been shorn from me; my sword had been taken away; my authority was gone; my soldiers openly sneered at me—save a few who were still loyal to their love for me. I applied for admission to the palace; it was denied me. I sent a message to the young queen; she refused to see me——"

"Ah! The young queen. I will ask you more about her presently. Go on."

"I still had a key which for many years I had carried,

and which admitted me by a private gate, to the garden of the palace. I remembered that it was still in my possesson. I knew it was the king's habit to walk in the garden between two and three o'clock in the afternoon."

"Yes."

"At two, I found the gate and let myself into the garden. I made my way through the shrubbery to a garden seat where I knew he was fond of sitting. I waited there."

"Yes."

"His majesty was almost an hour late in arriving; but when he did appear, I rose in front of him. For an instant I stood before him, and then I prostrated myself at his feet. Then——"

"Wait. Tell me first how he acted when he first discovered you."

"He appeared frightened; as if he thought it was my intention to assault him. He started back violently, and uttered a quick exclamation which I did not hear, for already I had dropped to my knees."

"And then——?"

"I cried out to him, 'Your majesty—sire—what wrong have I committed to incur your displeasure?'

"He waved his hand over my head and ordered me to leave him; but I cried out again, asking that he would at least hear me; whereupon he clapped his hands together, and so summoned four of his guard. They rushed upon me——"

"Wait again. This four, of the guard; were they soldiers whom you knew, or rather, who were known to you at all?"

"No; they were Swiss. They were a new importation into our country, brought there against my will, and only lately promoted to the guard of the palace."

"And these men—what did they do when they rushed upon you?"

"They hustled me from the king's presence without ceremony. One of them struck me with the flat of his sword. It is a wonder that I did not strike back; but I controlled myself with an effort. I heard the king laugh loud, and call out to them:

"'Deliver the scoundrel over to General Fernando, and tell the general to see to it that he does not appear here again!'

"Then he laughed again—and that is all I know. I was taken away. I was conveyed at once to the prison. I was thrust into a cell. I was kept there for days, with never a soul to come near me, save one of the members of that Swiss guard, who only sneered at me, and either could not or would not reply to my questions.

"He came and went in utter silence, with never a word."

"And all this time the preparations were going ahead for the marriage of Nerdinia to the Prince of Herznovia, eh?"

"I suppose so. I tell you I knew nothing of what was taking place beyond the walls of my prison."

"And then you made your escape. How?"

"Through the help of one of my own men. He came to me in the dead of night. He had the keys to the cell. He found his way to me, having drugged my guard. He conducted me to the outside of the prison, and there he gave me clothing with which to disguise myself, and a plentiful supply of gold with which to pay my expenses."

"And what did he say to you when he bade you go away?"

"His last words to me were these: 'Go, my general. You can best serve your country now by seeking outside aid. The king is no longer the king. He is somebody else. It is all a mystery which we cannot fathom. The soldiers are restless. They are mostly loyal to you, and they will await your return; but these Swiss guards who have been imported here, outnumber us, three to one. Go; and when you return, your own men will act with you.'

"I attempted to question him, but he did not dare remain an instant longer lest his absence should be discovered, and it would thus be known that he had aided in my escape. I had to be content to escape with what little information I possessed.

"From that moment, Mr. Carter, I knew that my only hope of success in the future must be in my utter disappearance. I knew that it would not do that I should take one soul into my confidence, and so it was that I made my way out of the country without letting one single person be made aware of what had become of me.

"I even avoided all search for news on my own part, lest my eagerness should betray me to my enemies, and that is how I came here to you before I knew that the princess had fled from Corazon.

"All that I knew about the affairs there, I have told you. I was led to believe that my son had attacked the Prince of Herznovia and had been killed by him. I am to-day as ignorant as you are about the affairs of the kingdom. I only know there is a mystery there, and that the mystery, whatever it is, involves my king."

"And now tell me something about the young queen."

"She is my queen, Mr. Carter," the old general said, with dignity. "What can I tell you about her?"

"You can tell me all you know about her."

"She was a Spanish princess, of the house of Carlos—you know that much."

"Yes. How old is she?"

"Barely eighteen."

"And the marriage between her and the king——"

"They were betrothed, as you doubtless know, since they were children. The marriage was celebrated less than half a year ago. The queen is very beautiful, very

haughty, and she has a temper that is almost ungovernable, save at times when she becomes coldly cruel. You will understand why I tell you this, sir. She is my queen and I ought not to say a word——"

"I know all about that; but I must know everything. Was there such a thing as love existing between her and the king?"

"Ah! I have thought so; and again I have thought that it was not so. I know that the king adores her."

"But you are not sure that she returns his passion; is that it?"

"There have been times when I have doubted it."

"And she is a Carlos, eh? Of the family name of—— what?"

"Echeveria. We speak of them all as Carlos."

"Yes; I know. Being a member of that family, she is a born conspirator; is it not so?"

"Decidedly."

The detective was silent for a long time, and then he said:

"I see very plainly, general, that results can only be accomplished by my being there on the ground. I must see things with my own eyes, and hear things with my own ears."

"I quite agree with you in that idea, sir."

"But how am I to accomplish that? How am I to get into the inner circle of the court? How am I to approach the conspirators—if conspirators there are—who have doubtless hedged themselves around with all sorts of safeguards? How——"

"I have thought of that, Mr. Carter."

"Have you, indeed? Tell me what you have thought."

"I have heard that you are a wonderful man at the art of disguising yourself, sir."

"Well?"

"There is a lieutenant who was on my staff—Lieutenant Angel Sela, by name."

"What of him? What about him?"

"He came to Corazon with the queen; he is a favorite with her, and therefore at the palace."

"Well?"

"Mr. Carter, if you were to grow a mustache, and then don a uniform of a lieutenant in the Palace Guards of Coraçon, you would have but to look in the mirror to see a perfect likeness of Lieutenant Sela reflected there."

"Ah! Indeed! Then this lieutenant must also strangely resemble the king himself. I remember when I was there that it was often remarked that the king and I resembled each other. You remember that, do you not?"

"Yes. I remember it."

Again the detective was silent for a considerable time; and then he remarked:

"General, I think I begin to see light through this mystery; but if I do, it is all very dim as yet, and it will have to await my arrival there, to develop it."

"But you think, do you not, that this suggestion of mine about the lieutenant is a good one?"

"I think it is most excellent—with a few additions. It was your plan that we should capture the lieutenant, and that I should personate him, was it not?"

"Precisely that."

"Very well; we will consider it. I think I can improve upon it somewhat, after I have arrived upon the ground; but——"

The detective ceased speaking suddenly, and appeared to listen; then he started to his feet.

"I certainly thought I heard my name called," he said; and even as he started to move toward the door, there came a vigorous rapping on the other side of it, and Joseph, the valet, appeared.

"Somebody called you from the street, sir," he said. "I thought——"

But the detective had already dashed past the servant and down the stairs.

In an instant he had thrown the outer door open; and as he did so, a body that had been leaning against it, fell to the floor at his feet.

It needed only one glance for the detective to recognize the general's son—the young Corazonian officer, who had accompanied the princess and Chick from the house earlier in the evening.

Blood was streaming from a wound in his side, from which the hilt of a dagger protruded; and upon this one of his hands was clasped tightly, while he appeared to hold the weapon in place in the wound.

When Nick Carter would have seized upon it, he faintly protested; and clutched it the more tightly.

"Bend nearer," he half whispered, half gasped. "Don't try to remove the dagger—yet. It would make me bleed the more, and I might not be able to tell you all there is to tell."

The detective placed his ear close to the wounded man's lips, and then the young officer continued.

"We were attacked," he said. "As we crossed a street together—I do not know where it was, for I do not know the city well enough—three carriages drove toward us. They hemmed us in on every side. It all seemed an accident, until suddenly the doors of the vehicles opened and men sprang out upon us. They attacked us on every side at once.

"We were entirely unprepared, for none of us expected an attack and were engaged in trying to shield the princess from the horses.

"I saw your assistant strike down two of the men with his fists, and then I saw him overpowered and thrown into one of the carriages. I saw the princess seized in the same manner—they threw a blanket over her head; they forced her into one of the carriages; I endeavored to

get nearer to her, and then somebody struck me with the dagger.

"I think I must have fainted then—but only for an instant, for I heard the carriages roll away from me—and then I crawled here, and——"

He gasped, and became unconscious

CHAPTER III.

JOHNNY THE CROSS, AND FOUR-EYED PETER.

Joseph, always ready with expedients, had already dashed into the adjoining house for the doctor who resided there, and by the time they were ready to carry young Calabria to a more comfortable place in which to lie, the physician had arrived on the scene.

An hour later, after the assistance he had summoned, had arrived, and after the young Corazonian officer had been placed under the care of a trained nurse, the doctor found the old general in the library, and to him gave the information that the wound was not mortal.

"He will live," was his comment, "but he will require constant and tender nursing, and it will be several weeks before he can be moved at all."

The detective was not in the house at that time.

Just as soon as he had seen the young officer safely in charge of skilled physicians, he hurried away to find out what he could about the attack that had ended so disastrously.

Nick knew from the fact that the young officer had crawled to the door of the house from the place of attack, and he had no difficulty in following the trail of blood to the spot itself; nor was he surprised to learn that it was only at the adjoining corner where the assault had been made.

Here he soon found several evidences of the struggle that had taken place.

He picked up Chick's hat from the street; a locket worn by the princess glistened upon the pavement; the half of a glove that had been torn from her right hand was beside it, and Chick's four-in-hand tie was not far away.

It was evident that the struggle had been fierce enough while it had lasted.

But that was all he could find.

There was nothing there to indicate in which direction the carriages had gone after they started away with their captives, and the detective looked around in vain for a sign of some person about the neighborhood who might have seen the affair, or at least have noticed the four vehicles when they were driven away from the spot.

But there was nobody; and the detective was on the point of turning away, when from out of the shadow of one of the high stoops, a slouching figure crept stealthily toward him.

Nick noticed the man the instant he appeared, and another time he might have paid much closer attention to him, for his manner of approach as well as the place from which he appeared, suggested that he had not been either honorably or honestly occupied.

But the detective stood still in the center of the street until the man had drawn quite near to him, and then it dawned upon him that the fellow was really intent upon imparting some sort of information, but was at the same time afraid to do so.

"Boss," said the man tentatively, stopping abruptly, while he was still a dozen feet away, "I think maybe you are looking for something here that I can help you find, and I'm willing to tell you if you won't ask me how I happened to see it."

"All right," replied Nick. "Come nearer."

Then, as the man drew nearer and a street light shone full in his face, the detective added:

"Hello! You are Johnny the Cross, aren't you?"

The man uttered a little cry of affright, and would have run away at once had not Nick reached out a detaining hand and held him.

"Not so fast, Johnny," he said. "I am not going to hurt you; neither am I going to ask you where you have been and what you were doing. I could guess if I tried; but I'm not going to try. Do you know me, Johnny?"

"Yes, sir. I do now. You're Nick Carter."

"Right. Now, tell me all you know about this affair."

"I won't be pinched when I git through, will I?"

"No; you have my word for that."

"Well, sir, it was this way. It was rather early in the evening for me to be making calls, but all the same, I happened to be doing that very thing, don't you see?" the man grinned.

"Yes; go on."

"And I happens to look out through a window jest in time to see two men and a woman a-crossin' the street, and jest at that minute likewise, three hacks——"

"Three, Johnny?"

"Jest three; no more, no less."

"Well; go on."

"Three hacks drives out into the street; the drivers all turns their horses at the same time so that they makes a little pen in which the three persons were corralled—see?"

"Yes."

"Then out jumps a lot of men from the hacks and sails into the three on the street, and right there they had a mix-up to beat the band. It was funny, too, how quick they done the job, how slick they done it, and how still it all was. If the woman tried to scream, nobody heard her; and then in a jiffy the hull thing was over with and away drives the hacks, leavin' only one of the men they had attacked behind them.

"At first off I thinks to myself that the cove is dead; but after a minute he moves, and then I seen him crawl

away. He went up the street a little way and went into——"

"My house," said Nick.

"Was it? Well, all the better. Now, Mr. Carter, there is one more thing that I ain't told you yet."

"What is it, Johnny?"

"You'll be square with me if I tell you; eh?"

"Yes. I will."

"I knowed one of them hack drivers."

"Ah! You did, eh?"

"Yes, sir. He's a crook like I am, only he ain't slick enough for my line of work. He goes in for the rough-and-tumble sort—like that he's been a-doin' now."

"Well, who is he?"

"Four-eyed Peter. I saw him as plain as day on the box."

"And you are positive that he was one of the drivers?"

"Jest as positive as I am that I am standing here at this minute."

"That's all right. The next thing is, do you know where he can be found?"

"I know where he hangs out, and we ought to find him there before morning if he don't go under cover after this job."

"All right, Johnny. We'll go there and see if we can find him; but, first, tell me how much swag did you get out of that house?"

"Not a blessed thing, so help me. I had only got well inside when I heard the noise in the street and looked outside to see what I have been telling you about. I didn't swipe a thing, so help me."

"Very good. I believe you. Now, how far is it to this place where you think we stand a chance of finding Four-eyed Peter?"

"Well, sir, the place is a good ways from here. It is down at the water-front, not far from South Ferry; and there wouldn't be any use for us to go there under three hours yet, anyhow, cos even if Peter is all through with his job he wouldn't naturally show up there jest yet."

"No; I suppose not."

"And, besides, I don't jest want to *take* you there."

"Why not?"

"Well, mebby you won't think it's much of a reason, but if it was ever known that I took *you* to that place, they'd slit my wizzen for me in no time."

"I see. And I suppose it would be rather difficult for me to get inside of the place unless somebody who is known there, *does* take me; eh?"

"That's about the size of it."

"And you are willing to take me, if—well, if I act a part well enough so that it will never be known that I am not what you represent me to be?"

"That's the ticket."

"I think I can promise you that, Johnny."

"You'll have to disguise yourself, Mr. Carter."

"All right," replied the detective. "Come with me. We will find some sort of a hack over at the square, and in that we will drive down-town. I'll make some changes at my down-town office, and after that we will see if we can find Four-eyed Peter."

There are some of the readers of the Nick Carter adventures who are aware of the fact that the detective has for years maintained an office in Liberty Street.

It is seldom used now; never, in fact, save for an emergency such as this one. Nick never receives clients there now, and rarely uses the place at all save for a resting place, or a place where he can make a change in his appearance when engaged in one of his regular down-town cases.

But to the Liberty Street office he had himself and the second-story thief driven at once, and was soon engaged in transforming himself into the old and now rarely assumed character of Joshua Juniper.

Johnny the Cross stared at the detective in open-eyed amazement while this transformation scene was being enacted, and could only gasp in astonishment when it was completed.

"I don't wonder that the guns of New York are afraid of you," he murmured in admiration. "And now, what is the game, Mr. Carter? You'll have to tell me what to do."

"You are merely to take me to the resort you have talked about."

"And let 'em all think that you're a guy that I've steered in there? It won't do. I'm no confidence man, and they know it. I never worked the 'come-on' game in my life, and they are onto that, too. The'd squeeze us both in a holy minute."

"You must pass me off for what I really am," said Nick, smiling.

"How do you mean? A country guy——"

"Not at all. Tell them frankly that I'm Nick Carter."

Johnny the Cross bounded nearly across the room in his amazement.

"And git the double cross quicker'n a wink?" he demanded. "Not much!"

The detective laughed aloud.

"I don't suppose that you noticed that I did a lot of fixing up of my face before I had quite assumed this countryman disguise, did you?"

"I didn't notice. I saw that you were doing a lot."

"Well, the point is this. If you say to them, when you take me in there, that I told you that I was Nick Carter and wanted to be taken to that particular place, the fact will let you out entirely if they ever discover that I really am the detective; but the main point is that not one of them will believe that I am Nick Carter, for the very reason that I will assert that I am he; and then, when I peel off this countryman disguise and appear like

one of themselves and have a good story to tell, they will accept me for what I appear."

"It looks kinder deep to me, sir, but mebby it'll work. At least I'm willing to try it."

"Then that is all that is necessary. The moment we are inside of the room, I want you to peel your eyes for Four-eyed Peter. If he is there, you must let me know it at once."

"And what am I to do after that?"

"Nothing. Just wash your hands of me. You must appear to have met me over near the ferry and that is all you know about me. I suppose the place is a saloon, isn't it?"

"Yes; a regular dive."

"And, therefore, a public place?"

"Well, it's public enough in the front part; but everybody don't get into the back room."

"Ah! I see. That part of the place is where you expect to see Peter."

"Yes."

"Then your play will be to take me into the front part of the place, leave me there while you go alone into the back part, and when you get in there, tell them that there is a guy outside who says he is Nick Carter. That will be enough. They will come out to interview me, and then if I don't get inside it will be my own fault—only you must not forget to let me know at once if the man Peter is there."

"Oh, I'll attend to that."

"Then I think we can start at once," said the detective.

CHAPTER IV.

NICK CARTER IN A HURRY.

Johnny the Cross led Nick Carter directly into the saloon and to the bar, which ran across the width of the building at the rear.

Here the crook called the proprietor to one side, and, having jerked his thumb over his shoulder toward the detective, whispered:

"Who d'ye s'pose the guy is, Madden?"

"He looks like a jay-bird from Hayseedville," replied the saloon-keeper sententiously.

"He says he's Nick Carter."

"*Whaaaat!!!!*"

Every customer in the saloon turned to look in surprise at the "boss," who was not given to expressing himself so loudly; and they were even more astonished to see him at once go off into a fit of uncontrollable laughter.

"Faith, but that's a good one!" he exclaimed, after he had somewhat recovered himself. "Did he tell you that himself?"

"He did."

"When?"

"Just now—when I met him."

"Where was that?"

"Over by the ferry."

"Call him over here to the end of the bar and introduce him to me."

Johnny did so, and as soon as Nick drew near, he said:

"I want to introduce you to the boss. Madden, this gentleman is Nick Carter, the great——"

Again Madden laughed immoderately.

"Sure," he said, "but that's too good to keep, so it is. Who are you, anyhow, stranger?"

"Well," drawled Nick, in reply, and slowly winking one eye, "it is no dream that the name you have just heard is one of the many that I adopt at times. I thought that maybe this chap, who says his name is Johnny the Cross, would be like enough to take me in if I told him that I was the detective, and I thought, too, that it would be a quick way of securing a welcome among your friends."

"It wasn't a bad idea," replied Madden, nodding and winking.

"That was what I thought. You see, I figured that if the boys thought I was really the detective, they would keep me here, anyhow, for safe-keeping, and if they thought I was lying about it, they would want to know why, and that would give me a chance to hide away for a time—and Madden, it is a case of keeping out of sight for me, for a time."

"I see. Do you know any of the men who come here?"

"I do not. Not a soul of them; unless——"

"Well, who?"

"Finnerty; I used to know him, but he's dead and gone now, ain't he?"

"Sure he is. He had a shock. Well, come along inside. I'll let you tell your story in there, and if you don't tell it straight, you'll never have a chance to tell another one."

"I know that. It's the chance I am taking."

"It isn't very far from here to the river," continued the saloon-keeper significantly.

"I know that, too."

To enter the back room they were obliged to pass around behind the bar; and the detective presently found himself in a wide, low place that was stuffy with the smell of stale beer and the reek of offensive cigars, and where there were perhaps a dozen men congregated.

One of the groups was engaged in some kind of a game of cards; another, composed of three, were conversing in low tones in a far corner; the remainder of the occupants of the place seemed to be engaged in a general conversation.

But they all looked up as the saloon-keeper, followed by Johnny and the detective, entered the place, and for a moment there was utter silence in the room.

Madden led the way to the center of the place, and in

doing so gave Johnny an opportunity to whisper into the detective's ear:

"That's Peter in the far corner, with the two others. He's facin' this way. Mebby the other two are the other drivers."

The detective made no sign that he heard the whispered remark at all, for already the saloon-keeper was announcing him.

"My friends," he said, and there was a distinct tone of banter in his voice, "I have brought Nick Carter here to see you."

With a bound, every man there was upon his feet—and especially was the fright of the three men in the corner noticeable. For every man, there was also a gun in evidence, so that for a moment it looked as if the detective was in serious trouble.

But he held his ground beside the saloon-keeper, stroking the tuft of whispers that he wore under his chin, and gazing smilingly around him.

"He's in one of his famous disguises," added the saloon-keeper, with a loud laugh; at which the others, perceiving that there was a joke somewhere, also laughed uneasily, and subsided again into their chairs, while the revolvers disappeared as mysteriously and suddenly as they had appeared.

"What's the joke, Madden?" demanded Four-eyed Peter, rising from his place in the corner, and striding forward until he was directly in front of the group in the middle of the room.

Before the saloon-keeper could reply, Nick interrupted.

"Let me explain," he said; and then, when the others looked at him inquiringly, he took a step backward, and said very quietly:

"I'm a stranger here. I have never seen any of you before, nor have any of you ever seen me. I wanted a place to get under a cover, and I met this gun, who says his name is Johnny the Cross. I says to him, says I, 'Johnny, I'm Nick Carter in disguise?' and he laughed, and says he 'Faith, you're a better looking man than I thought you was.' 'I am,' says I.

"Well, gentlemen, he brought me here, and he tells Madden what I told him, and Madden brings me in here. Now, wait a minute, for I ain't got through yet."

"It's getting to be a long story," growled Four-eyed Peter. "I've got business on hand."

"Well, there ain't much more to tell; only this: I'm the only original pickpocket in the world. Maybe there is one or more of ye here who thinks that he knows the game, but I can give the best of you cards and spades; and now, if you don't believe it, I'll prove it."

"How?" asked a man who until now had not spoken, and who, by his very appearance, Nick knew to belong to the pickpocket class.

Nick looked at the man and smiled; then, to the surprise of all, he began to pirouette around in the circle they had formed about him, at the same time singing a quaint French song which they seemed to admire.

The scowling faces began to clear; two or three of the men laughed; and when the detective did a fancy step or two, they crowded forward to watch him.

Suddenly the detective started forward and seized the pickpocket who had spoken to him.

For an instant he held him off at arm's length, and then whirled him round and round in a wild sort of a dance which lasted not more than a few seconds, but at the end of which the detective sent the man reeling back among the crowd.

Upon the instant, however, he seized another of the men and performed the same sort of stunt with him; and now the others, perceiving that there was fun on hand, laughed aloud at the unfortunate one of their number who happened to be seized by the detective.

"I'll buy wine when I get through with this!" Nick called out, as he released each man he had seized upon and compelled to dance with him.

There were some there who tried to dodge him; but those who had already been danced with were ever ready to push forward the others, and so, one by one, the detective seized upon them all.

They had accepted his presence there, at first, reluctantly; then grudgingly; but now he had brought them some fun, and it was deadly dull in that back room.

Here was a new man who was more than half drunk, to their way of thinking. He believed that he had found a safe place where he could hide. He sang well. He did some truly wonderful steps in dancing. He was making merry for them all, and it was evident from his manner and his speech that he had a wad of money with him which he proposed to spend.

On that account, if for no other reason, they were disposed to give him all the latitude he wished, and so, after a little, they seemed—with here and there an exception—to join in with the sudden fun-making.

And those few exceptions—they happened to be the very three men who had been seated in the corner, and of whom one was Peter—could not escape.

Their companions saw to it that they did not.

They were pushed forward into the grasp of the dancer by their companions.

It was a masterpiece of work which the detective performed with them.

He left them purposely to the last end of his orgie of dancing, and Peter he left until the very last one of all.

Then, somehow, without their realizing in the least what he was doing, the detective managed to seize them all one after another and in quick succession, so that practically he held them each a prisoner in his arms at the same time; that is, they were immediately in front of him.

This took place at the end of the wild dancing on the part of the detective.

With the three men almost in his grasp simultaneously, the detective suddenly leaped back toward the door, taking them with him—and then with almost the precision of counting, six sharp, metallic, snapping clicks sounded through the room.

There was not a man there who did not know that sound, and who did not recognize it on the instant, too, for when a man has once heard handcuffs snapped upon his wrists, he never forgets it.

There was a chorus of curses from the main body of the room, and the nine men—or eleven, including Madden and Johnny—reached for their weapons.

But their weapons were gone. Not one of them possessed a weapon of any sort; and then, as they turned to rush toward Nick Carter, they saw that he had whirled his three men up against the wall in the corner near the door, that he himself had thrown aside his long-tailed coat and was standing facing them all with a revolver in either hand, and that the three men were not only handcuffed behind their backs, but, also, they had been fastened together by linking one pair through another, so that now they were as utterly helpless as men could be.

"Stand back, all of you!" called out the detective. "I told you I was an expert pickpocket, and now I have proved it. I have got every gun and knife in the place. They are all in the pockets of that coat I have thrown on the floor. I took Madden's gun, and Johnny's, when we came into the room, and I have taken all the others while I was dancing with you, and otherwise making a fool of myself—and I have got these three chappies where they are down and out; eh? They're about as helpless as lambs with their feet tied together, eh? Now, my friends, what do you think of that?"

"I think," replied one of them, "that if this is a joke, it has gone far enough."

"Oh, it's no joke," laughed the detective. "I told you that I was Nick Carter, didn't I? Well, I *am* Nick Carter. I came here to get Peter and his two pals, and I'm going to take them away with me, too. *None of that*, you! You may as well understand that the first one among you who interferes with me now, gets shot. I'm not fooling, as you will soon know."

"What's the game, Carter? You've got the drop on us," growled one of the men, "but you don't seem to want only those three."

"The game is this," replied the detective slowly, so that all could hear and understand him. "Four-eyed Peter, and his two friends here, drove three hacks to-night to a corner near my house. There, the men in their hacks leaped out and attacked a young woman who was escorted by my assistant, Chick, and a young foreigner. One of the men struck a knife into the for——"

"That wasn't any of *us*," growled Peter; but Madden called out to him to shut his trap.

"The foreigner was stabbed and left for dead," continued the detective, "but I think he will recover. The others, Chick and the young lady, were kidnaped. Now, it happens that I am in a hurry, and I'm willing to let bygones be bygones and to forget that I have ever been in this place at all, on two conditions. One is that Peter and his friends are in a position to swear that no harm has come to Chick or the young lady, and the other is that they will tell me where to find them. If they do that, I will walk out as I came, and forget that I ever saw you, and, if not——"

"They will do it!" said Madden, with cold decision. "I'll see to that much!"

CHAPTER V.

CONSPIRATORS AGAINST THE KING.

When Madden, the proprietor of the saloon, uttered that remark, he stepped forward, and addressing himself directly to the three men who were handcuffed together, he added:

"Peter, you're the boss of your outfit, ain't you?"

"Yes," replied Peter sullenly.

"Well, this here is Mister Carter; he's the real thing, too," he continued, with grim humor. "Allow me to present you. And that done, I asks you now if you have heard what he has had to say?"

"I ain't deef, 'r daffy either," growled Peter.

"Peter," said Madden, "there ain't probably another man in the United States of America who could ha' done what this here gent has done to-night. I ain't a-throwin' no bokays, but it's glory's truth fur all o' that. And now he proposes to do the square thing. He says, says he, that if you up and give the plant all away like a real gentleman crook, that there'll be nothin' doin' agin' you or agin' any of us. Is that right, Nick Carter?"

"That is correct," replied Nick.

"Now, Peter, I'm on the level if I am a crook myself. You boys all know me, and when I pass my word, it goes. Is that right?"

"*Right!!*" came from all sides of the room.

"Then I says to Nick Carter, says I, 'Nick, tumble out them guns and return 'em to the boys, jest to show 'em that you mean what you say;' and then I says this: 'Nick, when you have done that, take the bracelets off'n Pete and his pals.' And when Nick Carter has done all that, I says, says I, 'Pete, you and your pals step up to the captain's office and settle on the terms laid down.' Is that satisfactory all around?"

"*Right!!*" came once again from all sides of the room.

Madden turned to the detective.

"Now, Nick Carter," he said, "it is up to you."

For reply, Nick kicked the coat that he had thrown on the floor into the middle of the room.

"Help yourselves, boys," he said. "Your tools are in that coat."

Then, without so much as glancing at them while they regained possession of their weapons, he deftly undid the handcuffs from the wrists of the three men he had so neatly captured, and set them free.

"There you are, all of you!" exclaimed Madden. "I claim that it is all accomplished after the queen's taste. And now——"

"And now," interrupted the detective, "I am going to deposit fifty plunks with you, Madden, for the boys to smoke up and eat up and drink up to-night—and if you don't mind, I think I will take Pete and his two friends over into a corner and talk with them quietly. They can tell you the story after I have gone. I have already told you that I am in a hurry."

"All right, Nick. You're as safe here as if you were in a church."

Peter and his two friends followed the detective rather sullenly into the corner, but they soon thawed out when the detective began to talk to them.

"All that I know about it at all, Nick Carter," said Peter, "is this: I sometimes drive a night-hawk hack, as you doubtless know. It helps me in my business. Well, last evening, jest as I was starting out, a fellow comes up to me, and he says, if you want to earn a hundred dollars——"

"Leave all that out," said the detective. "I don't care anything at all about that part of it."

"What *do* you want to know, then?"

"First, is the young woman safe?"

"She is as safe as can be. There was particular orders given that she should not be harmed."

"And what about Chick?"

"He is all right up to the present time—but I wouldn't give much for his chances when they get him where they want him."

"And where is that?"

"Out at sea."

"Out at sea?"

"That is what I said. As soon as we got the two in the hacks with the others, we drove them straight down here to the Battery. There was a launch waiting for them over near the barge office. They all piled into it. They was talking Spanish, mostly among themselves, and it is a language that I speak, having spent some time in a Spanish prison once."

"Tell me what you discovered."

"That is what I am telling you. Out there in the bay somewhere, there was a big steamer, what is the private yacht of some king. She was all ready to sail away the minute the party gets on board. They said as how the young woman was a princess who had skipped from her own country and folks, and was wanted there, bad—and that they were here to take her there."

"That happens to be the truth, too," said the detective. "What more?"

"There wasn't much more. They called the man they stabbed by the title of colonel, and mentioned his name as Calabria. They thought he was killed and was glad of it. I thought he was, too, and was mighty sorry, for I don't like to be mixed up in things of that kind. I made 'em pay me an extra hundred for it, too."

"Quite right. What else?"

"It was their talk that they would take the other man—that was Chick—out to sea with them, and that when they got out there far enough, they would simply tie a shot to his feet and heave him overboard."

"Is that all you know about it?"

"It is every word, so help me."

"And you do not think that either Chick or the young lady were hurt or injured in any way at the time you left them?"

"I know that neither of them were hurt in the least. Two of their own outfit were badly used up, for Chick hit 'em—but he only had a blanket thrown over his head. I don't think he had a bruise."

"Did you hear any names mentioned? I mean, names of the party concerned in the abduction—in the attack on the princess and the colonel?"

"No; that is, only when they was talking about heaving Chick overboard."

"What did you hear then?"

"I heard one of them say that as long as the job had been so well done, it would be better to take Chick to the general, as well as the princess. That is all."

"So there is a chance that they may not murder him on the way over."

"Oh, yes, there is a chance; but all the same I shouldn't like to take his chances."

The detective waited to hear no more.

He was satisfied that Peter had told him the truth, and so, after thanking Madden for all that he had done in the matter, Nick took his leave.

There is always somebody on duty at the maritime exchange, and Nick hastened around to it at once, for it was located only a few blocks from where he had his interview with Four-eyed Peter.

Once there, it did not take him long to satisfy himself of the truth and correctness of Peter's story.

He found that such a yacht had appeared in the bay that morning; that she had sent an officer ashore to comply with the necessary formalities connected with entering and leaving a port, and had announced that she might sail again at any moment.

After that, there remained nothing more for him to do but to return to his home, and he arrived there about three in the morning.

The old general was seated beside the bed where his wounded son was sleeping, and he had himself dropped into a doze.

But, like the soldier that he was, he roused himself

quickly when he discovered that the detective had returned, and soon imparted the information that the doctors had assured him of the ultimate recovery of Eulogio.

The detective nodded his head as the old man proceeded, and then, in a few hasty sentences, told the general all that he knew about the abduction of the princess.

"There is only one thing to do now, general," he said, in conclusion.

"And that, I suppose," said the general, "is to carry out our original plan, and sail for Corazon to-morrow."

"By all means."

"It is more than likely, too, that we will arrive as soon, if not sooner, than the others."

"You think so?"

"Yes. The imperial yacht is not fast. She is in fact, rather slow. We go to Havre and thence by rail, while she goes all the way by water. It is likely that we will beat them by at least a day—but we must leave my son behind."

"Yes."

* * * * * * *

We will not intrude upon the patience of the reader by dwelling upon the journey from New York to the City of Uarapa, in the kingdom of Corazon. It is sufficient to state that Patsy, the detective's third assistant, accompanied him; and that before their departure, Nick persuaded the old general to permit him to so disguise him that both felt that now the old warrior could safely travel throughout the kingdom without the least danger of recognition.

Rather contrary to their expectations, they experienced no difficulty whatever in crossing the frontier and entering the Corazonian territory—nor, in fact, in entering the city of Uarapa itself.

It was after dark, although still early in the evening, when they arrived, and they speedily discovered that some unusual excitement was afoot.

Nor were they long in discovering what it was.

Criers along the streets were announcing through megaphones that the imperial yacht had arrived in the harbor, three miles down the mountain from the city, and that her royal highness, the Princess Nerdinia, had returned to Corazon.

As the detective and the general rode in their carriage through the crowds that thronged the streets, and listened to those shouts about the princess, they looked at each other in blank amazement.

"What does it all mean?" asked the detective.

The old man shook his head, and replied that he did not know.

"Where is your conspiracy? Or a breath of it? Or a smell of it?" asked the detective.

The old man shook his head again. He was sadly puzzled.

"All these people," continued the detective, "seem strangely jubilant. The princess ran away from them, and traveled second-class in order to do so. In order to bring her back to this country, it was necessary to abduct her from the country where she had taken refuge—and yet, before she has set foot on the shore, she is fêted. I confess that I do not understand it."

"We must wait," said the old man. "To-morrow, perhaps——"

"To-morrow? I must know to-night. Do you think that I have forgotten the danger in which Chick stands? Do you suppose that I can wait until to-morrow to find out if he is alive, or dead?"

The detective would have said more, but at that instant the carriage drew up in front of the hotel where they were to stop, and he felt the general seize his arm.

"Wait a moment," the old man breathed in his ear. "Yonder is an officer—a captain, who will know. I will ask——"

He got no farther, for at that moment the crowd between the carriage and the building parted in the middle; a double file of soldiers appeared as if by magic; the same officer to whom the general had referred stepped toward them and saluted grimly.

"We welcome you back to Corazon, General Calabria," he said coldly, "though it is to be regretted that you deemed it necessary to come in disguise. Your friends, the detective and his young assistant, are also welcome. You will be kind enough to step down, gentlemen, and follow me, for we already have apartments provided for you."

The general had started to descend from the carriage, but now he drew back.

"Do you mean that we are under arrest?" he demanded.

"You are conspirators against his majesty, the king," replied the captain coldly. "At sunrise you will be shot. Follow me!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE QUEEN OF CORAZON.

Nick Carter had confessed himself uneasy since the moment when the express-train that brought them to Uarapa rolled in at the station.

There had been something unreal, to him, in the atmosphere. He felt that there was something in the aspect of things which did not appear on the surface; and when he heard the street criers announcing to the populace that the Princess Nerdinia had returned to Uarapa, his natural training as a detective told him that there was trouble ahead.

And then, suddenly, he remembered that he had taken no precautions at all, before leaving New York, to conceal the fact that he was going, or to prevent his place of destination from becoming known.

There was always the cable to apprise the Corazonians of his approach, accompanied by the old general, and his own assistant, Patsy.

What could be easier than that the wily conspirators of Corazon should calmly await the approach of these men whom they would be delighted to have in their power? What could be easier than to charge Nick and the general with conspiring against the king, the moment they set their feet upon Corazonian territory? And what could be easier than to shoot them at once as conspirators, and to let the long, red-tape proceedings of diplomacy explain the event afterward?

All this had been coursing through the brain of the detective during the ride from the railway station to the hotel, where they had elected to stop; and so it happened that he was, in a measure, prepared for the sudden coup of the officer in charge of the guard which was to place them under arrest.

Nick had forgotten at the moment that the great prison of the city was located on the street directly behind the hotel, and that, therefore, he and the general could not have chosen a better place for the working out of the plot against them.

And he saw all that plot quite clearly now.

It was all very simple.

The conspirators had very easily discovered, in the first place, that the princess had fled to America; doubtless she had been followed and watched almost all the time; doubtless they were also content to let her remain where she was, so long as she was comparatively alone.

But when the old general arrived on the scene, his activity put at once a different aspect on affairs. It was time, then, for the home government, as at present conducted, to interfere.

That explained why the imperial yacht had been sent after her; it explained the abduction; it explained the foreknowledge they had of the approach of Nick Carter and the general—and it explained this reception that had been prepared for them; prepared so that they should arrive in the city without a thought of danger menacing them, and so that they should voluntarily drive almost directly to their prison, from which they were to be freed only to meet with an ignominious death.

As the carriage was driven up to the curb, the detective whispered in Patsy's ear:

"They know us, Patsy, and they mean to arrest us first, and shoot us afterward. If we ever see the inside of their prison, it means death—and there are a thousand chances against one that we can get away."

"I was beginning to think that things looked a bit queer," replied Patsy, in the same undertone. "Tell me what to do, and I will do it."

"Do you see that fellow who rides at your side of the carriage?"

"Yes."

"He has kept about where he is now ever since we left the station."

"Yes; I have noticed that, too."

"That is a good horse he rides, and you are a good horseman. Have you a sharp knife in your pocket?"

"Sure thing."

"Get it out and open it. Have it ready. When I say *now!* you reach out and seize the bridle. Slash your knife through the cinch of his saddle. You ought to be able to unhorse the man and to tip him into the road before he knows what has happened."

Patsy looked around him, and replied:

"I think I can do it."

"All right," said Nick. "That is your game. It doesn't matter much what you do after that, if you only succeed in getting away."

"But what will you——"

"Hush! There is no time now, lad!"

The carriage drew up at the curb; the crowd parted in the middle; the soldiers advanced and the captain stepped forward as has already been described.

Nick waited until the conversation had reached the point already given—until the captain thought that he was safe in announcing himself plainly—and then he acted.

He reached out suddenly and seized the captain in his iron grasp.

With a jerk he drew the man toward him, and pulled him bodily over the door of the open carriage.

At the same instant he threw the man bodily into the arms of the old general who had already fallen backward upon the cushions, and with a loud cry to the old man to hold him, no matter what happened, he leaped over them both to the seat where the driver and the footman were seated.

It seemed as if with one motion of his muscular arm he swept them both from the high seat into the street.

He had somehow also managed to get hold of the driver's whip, and this he now brought down with savage force upon the flanks of the horses, with the result that, stung by the pain, they reared and snorted and attempted to run.

But it seemed as if a hundred pairs of hands had seized their bridles; and here, again, Nick Carter's wonderful powers of resource stood him in good stead.

He threw the whip from him and with the same motion brought one of his small revolvers, that he always carried in his sleeves, into use.

It contained five cartridges only, but the five were exploded with such rapidity that the reports could scarcely be counted—and with the result that two pairs of arms that were attempting to hold the now maddened animals, dropped paralyzed from the reins they had grasped, and one other man dropped silently to the ground, while several others sank with loud cries under the feet of the plunging animals.

It all happened so quickly that it was over before those who were present could fully realize it—and then the horses dashed away at a wild run, dragging the carriage with them; the carriage in which the old general sat grimly holding to the prisoner whom Nick Carter had thrown into his arms, and upon the box of which the detective himself was now using a second revolver as a menace to those who would have stood in his way of escape.

Fifty feet had not been covered in the flight, however, before a fusillade of bullets came from the rifles of the soldiers.

They sang through the air around Nick Carter's head; they punctured his clothing: two or three of them grazed his flesh; one sent his hat hurtling through the air—and others found the bodies of the horses for lodgment.

Horses sometimes shriek like men when they are wounded, and these did that very thing.

Sometimes they run on for several strides after they are mortally hurt—and those horses did that, also.

When the bullets struck them, they screamed; then they seemed to swerve aside; then they made a sharp turn to the right, and so dashed down a side street—a narrow street—and into a high brick wall at the end of it, for the street was a cul de sac.

The force of the impact against the wall sent Nick Carter flying through the air, over the already dead horses, over the wall, over the hedge which lined the wall on the inner side, and so—upon the grass, directly at the feet of a woman.

The detective alighted upon his feet, and he would have fallen forward on his knees but for the presence of the woman.

As it was, he fell directly against her; and when she would have screamed out he gently, but firmly, placed one hand over her mouth and held it there.

"Listen," he said, speaking calmly and quietly in her ear, and holding her so that she could not even struggle to escape, "this is a matter of life and death with me. Do you hear the people yelling like demons out there in the street? They are after me. I do not care who or what you are, but whoever you are or whatever you are, you shall aid me to escape. I know that I am now in the garden of the palace. You may be a maid of honor or you may be the queen herself—it makes no difference to me. If you struggle or attempt to cry out, I—well, you will regret it."

Before him was a winding, gravel path; beyond that, through the shrubbery, he could see the walls of a building, which he knew to be a part of one of the extensions of the palace.

Scarcely pausing, he lifted the woman from her feet, and bearing her in his arms against his own body so that she could not move or struggle, he sprang forward with his burden.

From the spot where he encountered her to the building he had seen through the shrubbery, the distance was rather less than thirty yards; and reaching the building, he sprang upon a low balcony, behind which there was an open French window.

In an instant more he had passed inside the house with his burden, and had closed the window and pulled down the blinds.

"Do not speak, madam," he continued, in the language of the country. "It is too dark to see your face here, so I am like to be no wiser as to who you are, than I was out there where I had not time to look. Neither can you see me. But you are in no danger if you do nothing to betray my presence here."

He withdrew his hand from over her mouth and gently forced her into a chair, where he still stood guard over her, keeping one hand upon her shoulder, and the other one in readiness to seize her again at any instant.

Coming from the glare of the electric lights without, into the garden, and thence into the house where he had so quickly drawn down the blinds, it was impossible for the detective to see more than an outline of the woman's figure; but, nevertheless, he could see her eyes as they burned and glowed at him through the darkness, and he somehow knew that she was young.

She did not speak or attempt to move, and presently he demanded:

"Did you hear me, madam?"

"Perfectly," she replied, with a calmness which astonished Nick. "But you ordered me not to speak. I was only obeying you."

Nick smiled, although she could not see that he did so.

"Who are you, madam?" he asked, not unkindly.

"I am a woman. That is sufficient for the present, is it not?"

"I suppose so. This is a part of the palace, is it not?"

"It is."

"The private apartments of the queen, I take it."

"You are quite correct."

"And you are, then, one of her maids?"

"Let us suppose so, for the present."

"Is this room, by any chance, your own private apartment?"

"It happens so to be, sir. The only really exclusive one I have at my disposal."

"Then, for the present, at least, I am safe here. Nobody would think of looking here for me, do you think?"

"I think it extremely unlikely. The point concerning which I am chiefly interested, sir, is how long do you intend to remain here?"

The detective looked around him, but he could see nothing.

"If it were not so dark, madam," he replied, "I might

answer your question. As it is, I can only assure you that I must remain here until it is quite safe for me to leave."

She shook herself free from his grasp, and replied:

"If you will have the goodness to release me, sir, I will promise not to cry out or to call for assistance; but you may as well know at once that this apartment is the private room of the queen; and that I——"

She hesitated an instant, and then added:

"I am the Queen of Corazon."

CHAPTER VII.

THE CAPTAIN OF THE GUARD.

There is no denying the fact that Nick Carter was astonished—and yet the surprise he felt was not in proportion to the circumstance, either.

The language in which they had been conversing was Spanish—her native tongue—and in the closing remark which she addressed to him when she proclaimed herself to be the queen of Corazon, there sounded all the haughtiness of her rank and position.

For a moment after it the detective remained silent.

His impulse was to laugh, for strangely enough the situation struck him as being ludicrous in the extreme; but he believed that in silence he could best reassure her—and he was correct.

It was the queen who broke the silence, and she uttered merely one word.

"Well?" she demanded.

"Your majesty will pardon me if I continue to address you as madam," said the detective calmly. "It will be wiser for both of us, I think, if I at least keep up the pretense of not knowing who you are. It is rather an astounding circumstance that I should be thrown bodily over the wall into your private garden and should, in fact, land directly at your feet, is it not?"

"Do I understand that you were *thrown* over the wall? I was under the impression that you leaped the barrier."

"Madam," he said, "before we enter upon a useless discussion, I would like very much to be assured of my surroundings, and if there is any likelihood of an interruption here."

"Your surroundings?" She laughed a little as if the question amused her. "I have already informed you that this is the only room in the palace wherein I am assured of privacy. It is at the extreme end of one of the wings of the palace; it was fitted expressly for me after I came here, and no other person—not even the king himself—ever passes the threshold unless summoned by me."

"That is as it should be," replied Nick. "For the present, at least, I am greater than the king. But, madam, you seem to be in no wise concerned about my identity."

"Why should I be? You forced yourself upon me——"

"On the contrary, I was forced upon you entirely against my will."

"At all events you seemed to be in great haste when you came."

Nick smiled.

"The only wonder is that it was not my dead body that fell in front of you. There were bullets enough flying around, surely."

"Then it was you at whom they were shooting?"

"Yes."

"Then you are——"

"Go on, madam; who do you think I am?"

"I do not know—only that I know you to be a foreigner; an American, I should say."

"You are quite correct."

"And I heard whispers through the palace to-day of the expected arrival of a detective from New York who was accompanying General Calabria home; a detective who has harbored the runaway princess Nerdinia, who has taken up with her supposed cause, and who was on his way here to conquer a kingdom, to usurp the powers and prerogatives of a king, and—ah, well! that should be sufficient—save that I heard that the name of the man was Nicholas Carter."

"Madam," replied Nick, bowing with mock humility, "you are a marvel of discrimination. Permit me to present myself to you as the Nicholas Carter you have mentioned. Permit me also to ask if those whispers you heard through the palace included the information that I was to be arrested as soon as I arrived in Uarapa?"

"Certainly," she replied calmly; "and you were also to be shot at sunrise in the morning."

Nick shrugged his shoulders.

"An interesting program," he said.

"One which seems to have miscarried, however, Señor Carter."

"Fortunately, yes."

"But is it true?"

"Is what true, madam?"

"That you have come here to interfere in the affairs of the kingdom?"

"It is quite true that I have come here in the interests of Princess Nerdinia."

"And of General Calabria?"

"Their interests at the present moment seem to be identical."

For a moment she was silent, and when she did speak again it was with an entire change of subject. And also, to the surprise of the detective, she used the English language.

"Do you realize, Mr. Carter, what would be your fate—and mine—if it were known that I had harbored you—here in this room?"

"I can imagine," replied Nick dryly. "You are Spanish."

"Aye; and so are we all Spanish—in training at least—in this country. You have come—unbidden, it is true, but nevertheless you are here—to the private apartment of the queen; and now——"

She paused suddenly and bent her head in the attitude of one who listens, at the same time making a quick gesture to enjoin silence upon him; and now the detective's eyes had become so accustomed to the dark that he could see her more plainly.

But he barely had time to notice this when he heard footsteps and voices outside, and he realized that several men were approaching the low-cut window through which he had entered the room.

For an instant they both listened intently; and then the queen glided toward him with all the grace and alertness of a cat.

She reached out and pressed two fingers against his lips to enjoin silence, while at the same time she turned him around where he stood and then pushed him quickly toward a huge canopied and curtained bed.

When he reached the side of it, he hesitated, but she urged him forward impetuously and insistently.

"Quick!" she whispered. "It is the only place where you will be safe."

"But where?" he asked, mystified.

"Upon it. Roll yourself into a ball. Quick! Listen!"

Even as he obeyed her and leaped lightly upon the bed, heavy feet trod upon the balcony outside the window, and there came the sound of rapping knuckles against the shutters.

The queen's dexterity was remarkable.

In an instant she seized upon a mass of gowns which one of her maids had laid out for her to select from, and had tossed them in apparent confusion upon the bed—but in such a manner that they entirely covered the detective, and so concealed him.

Then, as the rapping was repeated a second and a third time, she called out sharply:

"Who is there? What is wanted?"

"It is the captain of the guard, your majesty. I wished to assure myself that you were safe—that your majesty had felt no alarm; and now that I know——"

"Wait!" she commanded. "Stay where you are!"

"Yes, your majesty."

She crossed the room and turned on the electric-light switch, thus brilliantly illuminating the place. Then, with a quick glance toward the bed to see that no part of Nick Carter's clothing was revealed, she threw the window open and faced the man and his followers, who were standing just without it.

There were five men there altogether; four soldiers and an officer in the uniform of a lieutenant who had announced himself as the captain of the guard—and he quickly dropped upon one knee before his queen.

"Lieutenant Sela, acting captain of the palace guard," he announced himself. "I crave your majesty's pardon for this interruption, but a desperate man has escaped from my soldiers and is at present at large. It was thought that he had penetrated to the palace garden, and I feared——"

"*You* feared, sir?"

"Your pardon, your majesty. It was feared that the man might alarm you—in fact, that he might even do you an injury. May I venture to ask if you have seen or heard any sign of him, your majesty?"

"Is it likely that I should have done so, and remained sleeping in my chair? You have exceeded your duty, Lieutenant Sela; you should have sent one of my maids here instead of presuming to intrude upon my privacy in person."

She noticed as she spoke that his keen eyes traveled past her and rested lingeringly upon the bed, and, as if it were an act of restlessness on her part, she moved so that she obstructed his view in that direction.

But he was fully as crafty as she was, for in an instant he also moved a little to one side, so that he again commanded a view of the bed.

She wondered if the man had discovered the presence of some person hiding under the confusion of gowns she had thrown over the detective—but she did not dare to turn her head to look again in that direction.

"Go!" she commanded the lieutenant; and she raised her hand and pointed past him into the darkness of the garden.

"Your majesty will permit me to leave a guard in the garden?" he asked, with apparent humility.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"As you please," she said; and she kept her arm raised with the index finger of her hand pointing the way for him to go.

During this conversation he had not advanced at all into the room, but had remained just outside the window. Now he bowed low and stepped backward.

The instant he did so, the queen moved forward and again dropped the blinds into place, so that absolutely nothing could be seen from the outside of what took place in the room.

Then she deliberately turned in her tracks and studied the appearance of the bed; and as she did so a slow smile dawned on her face.

It was a strange smile, too, for there was derision, contempt, fear, amusement, and anger expressed in it all at once.

She could see why the lieutenant had kept his eyes fixed upon the bed; she understood now that the captain of the guard had known all the time he was standing at the window that there was a man concealed there.

A fold of one of the gowns that she had thrown over the detective had fallen aside and so had plainly revealed one of his feet, and the captain of the guard had seen it.

For a moment or two the queen remained where she was, thinking, for in truth she did not know at all how to act. She did not know what Lieutenant Sela would do; she could not tell whether he would report the matter at once, or lie in wait on his own account in order to make the most of the advantage he had gained over his queen.

Knowing him as she did, she rather believed that he would select the latter course.

There were bolts upon the windows—slight ones to be sure, and utterly incapable of keeping a determined man outside; but such as they were she shot them into place.

Next she drew the curtains over the blinds, and then she turned off the switch of the electric light and rapidly crossed the floor to the bedside.

With one sweep of her hand she threw the litter of gowns to the floor, and at the same time she seized the detective by the arm.

"Come!" she whispered to him. "My danger now is as great, or greater, than your own. The captain of the guard saw you. He knows that you are here. He will return shortly. Perhaps even now he is listening outside the window. What is to be done? Oh, what is to be done? I was brave a moment ago; but now I am frightened. There is terror on every side of me—and, oh, how I fear that man! How I fear him!"

"Do you mean the captain of the guard? Do you refer to the man Sela?" asked Nick.

"Ah! You know of him? Yes. He is the man I fear. He is a devil! He is—*ah! Listen!*"

She started back in terror, for again there came a tapping at the window, and both of them realized that the captain of the guard had returned.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CHAMPION OF A QUEEN.

Nick Carter realized that an emergency was indeed at hand, and that in a measure it was if anything worse for the queen than for himself.

But the detective was quick to think and quick to act.

The superb courage of the queen, which had never faltered until this moment, seemed to have left her entirely, and so now he took the reins in his own hands.

He seized her by the arm, drew her toward him, and whispered rapidly in her ear:

"You promised to do in all things exactly as I tell you to do," he said. "And now, open the window part way; tell the man why he has returned; induce him to step inside the room—if he is alone, and if you can do it. If there are others with him, and they should seek to force their way in here, step aside and let them come, but do you get behind that couch and remain there until it is all over. Now act, for they are rapping again."

He noticed that his words and his manner of delivering them seemed to have imparted a new courage to her, for she stepped at once to the window, threw back the curtains and drew the blinds; then she half opened one-half of the window.

Sela—for it was he—at once stepped forward, and with a degree of assurance that at another time would have angered the queen; now it merely frightened her. Nevertheless she demanded of him sharply:

"Why have you returned? What do you want here, Lieutenant Sela?"

The young officer laughed insolently.

"Do I interrupt a tête-à-tête?" he asked. "I will have to ask your majesty to turn on the light again. I have returned for my prisoner. He is here."

"Your prisoner?" she repeated after him.

"Yes."

As he spoke Sela stepped boldly into the room and advanced toward the place where he knew the electric switch to be located.

"If you will not turn on the light," he exclaimed rather roughly, "I will attend to it for you."

She started to spring in front of him, forgetting for the moment what the detective had instructed her to do; but he brushed her aside with a short laugh.

"Listen to me for a moment," he said, stopping short before he reached the electric switch. "Your majesty will understand that I am scarcely to be trifled with just now. I desire that the man who is concealed in this room should hear me and understand my meaning, also."

"He hears you," said Nick quietly, from the darkness, and at the same time taking a stealthy step nearer to the officer.

Sela laughed softly.

"Ah!" he said. "You are there, are you? I have found you again. It is well. Let me tell you, sir, that I have twenty men grouped at convenient places around this wing of the building. One summons from me would call them here at once."

He may have fancied that he heard Nick Carter laugh; at all events, he continued in a somewhat different tone:

"You may sneer at the information if you wish, and it might be that, knowing your own life to be already lost, you would not hesitate to lose it in fighting against them; but there is Queen Mercedes to be considered. It would be a fine scandal, would it not, to call those men here to arrest you? To force a pitched battle here in the private room of the queen? To let it be known that you have been hiding here half an hour?"

He paused an instant, but as he received no reply from either of the persons he was addressing through the darkness, he continued:

"It was a remarkable dash for liberty that you made, was it not? It was a masterly piece of work on your part to have turned the horses into this narrow street that runs behind the garden wall of the palace, was it not? It was a great stroke of good luck that you should leap the wall at exactly the right spot, was it not? It was still more remarkable that you should find the queen there, awaiting you; eh? It was all an accident that the instant you appeared she should bring you here to this room, and that you should spend all that time in the dark until I arrived to interrupt you?"

He paused again, and this time Nick Carter answered him.

"We are waiting," he said quietly, "to understand just what it is that you are trying to threaten—just what it is that you intend to do."

It was the queen who spoke now, and rapidly.

"I will tell you," she said vehemently. "This man—this Sela—this reprobate and scoundrel has persecuted me all my life. He has found a means to give a double meaning to everything that I have ever done. He has always threatened me with all sorts of evils, and all this in the guise of love. And now he would insinuate that I expected your coming to-night; that you knew me to be here; that I was waiting for you; that the attack upon you in the street only precipitated a meeting between us. He would make it appear that you are my lover—you whom I never saw until now. He——"

A low laugh from Sela interrupted her.

"You guess well, Mercedes," he murmured insolently; "only you sadly err in one thing. I have come here to make terms with you—you and this last lover of yours, who——"

The words ended in a gasping gurgle in his throat, for Nick Carter's hand had shot forward, had seized him, and had effectually shut off further speech.

When Sela would have struggled, he found himself utterly helpless in that giant grasp that was upon him, for during the conversation the detective had gradually drawn nearer under cover of the darkness, until he was in a position to seize upon the man at any instant he wished to do so.

And now, having seized him, the detective forced him back into a chair; and then, while he still held him by the throat so that he could not cry out, he whispered in his ear:

"It is not my life, but yours, that is in danger now. I shall release my hold upon your throat enough so that you can answer me, but, if you attempt to cry out or to call your men to your aid, that instant I will kill you. Do you understand that?"

Sela stretched his neck to catch his breath, when the detective loosened the hold upon it and then he essayed to answer.

"You will not kill me," he said. "You dare not do it."

For reply Nick shut down again upon the man's windpipe, and in so doing pressed the joint of his middle finger cruelly against the muscles of Sela's neck so that he groaned in spite of himself. Then he released him again.

"Now answer me," ordered the detective. "And take warning from what you have already experienced. Is it true that your men surround this part of the palace?"

"It is quite true; you will discover presently that it is only too true."

"Do they know where you are? Do they know that you are here?"

"They are not fools; they can guess," was the insolent reply.

"Ah!" said Nick. "I begin now to understand you—and I am glad that I do. It renders some other things quite clear to me. You have led your men to suppose that you held an appointment with the queen."

"What else could they suppose?" was the cowardly rejoinder. "Did not four of them accompany me to the window but a few moments ago? Did they not see me in conversation with the queen? Did I not give them plainly to understand that my business here was not finished as yet? Did I not post them at convenient places outside, to keep watch? And what, suppose you, do they think they are watching for? For you, the escaped conspirator! Ah, no! But to see to it that nobody is permitted to interrupt me while——"

Like a vise Nick Carter's fingers shut down upon the man's throat.

The awful sentiment he was uttering died in his throat in a hollow gurgle. His fingers twitched and his hands flew upward in a futile attempt to tear away the grasp of the detective upon him. His feet knocked together; his knees drew up toward his chin; his whole body became convulsed with the agony of that choking he was receiving—and all the time Nick Carter pressed the harder.

It was not until the man had become absolutely limp in his grasp that the detective relinquished his hold, and then, very quietly, he said:

"I think, your majesty, that you may venture to turn on the lights now. We will require light for what else we have to do."

She started to cross the room, but paused long enough to place a hand upon the detective's shoulder and to ask:

"Have you killed him?"

"I do not think so; but give us light, and we will see."

In another moment the room was flooded with light, and then they saw the lieutenant lying limp and apparently lifeless in his chair. His eyes were open and

staring, and altogether he appeared like a dead man, save for the fact that he was breathing in spasmodic gasps.

Nick Carter crossed the floor in two strides and tore the silken cords from the curtains over the bed; and with these he bound the young officer so firmly that he could not move.

Next, as the man began to show signs of consciousness, he forced his jaws apart, and placed an improvised gag between them which he drew tightly into place.

Then, utilizing still more of the cord from the bed curtains, he bound the man to the chair so that it would be impossible for him to move, and then he drew back and stood in the middle of the room regarding him.

And all this time the queen had remained silent, watching him with wondering eyes; but now she approached him again and once more touched him on the arm.

"What are you going to do?" she asked. "What are you thinking of now?"

"I was thinking," he replied, without turning his head, "of something that old General Calabria told me before we left New York."

She made no remark, and he continued in that same meditative manner.

"The general told me about this man; he said that there was resemblance between us—although I must confess that I do not see it now; but he suggested that I masquerade as this lieutenant, and so find my way into the palace, and—and to the king."

Nick turned suddenly and faced the queen, but what he would have said died upon his lips. It was the first time that he had seen her fairly in the full blaze of light. He had had no idea that she was really so beautiful—this young queen as yet barely past her eighteenth birthday.

And just now she seemed more beautiful than ever, for there was a smile of scorn on her lips, and a flashing in her eyes, and a determination in her manner, all produced by the words the detective had uttered.

"The king!" she said; and laughed a low, mirthless laugh. "There is no king in Corazon! The king is a traitor to his own. He is a mere puppet in the hands of a few conspirators. He is little better than a prisoner. Above all things, he is a besotted fool!"

"Ah!" said Nick, and he looked at the queen strangely. "I begin to comprehend things which have had no meaning for me until now. Madam, until I was thrown over that garden wall at your feet, I was led to believe that you were the head conspirator."

"I? A conspirator? I? *Madre de Dios!* Do you not know what I am? I am the veriest prisoner here. I——"

"Hush, madam. This is neither the time nor the place for us to talk. There is a way through the palace, is there not, other than by the garden?"

"A way? Yes—and no. There is a way, but it is barred against us. I tell you that I am a prisoner here. It is not known, but it is true."

She raised one hand and pointed toward some curtains that hung against the wall behind where Nick was standing.

"Yonder there is a way," she said, smiling sadly, "but it is guarded by doors, and by men who are armed against me, and by maids who watch me."

Suddenly she threw herself on her knees before him and stretched out her hands.

"Oh, sir!" she cried out, "you are a brave man. You fear nothing. Take me away from this awful place! Help me to escape! Help me to reach my own country, where I can tell my father the truth of all that has happened here. He will rend this palace apart, stone by stone! He will drench the mountains of Corazon with blood when he knows the truth! I was a happy child until they made me a queen; but now I am surrounded by treachery. Death by poison and by assassination is everywhere, and I am utterly alone and helpless."

CHAPTER IX.

THE FLIGHT THROUGH THE PALACE.

The detective bent forward and raised the young queen to her feet again; then he led her gently toward the couch and told her to be seated.

"It is true," he said kindly, "that you are only a child;" and he smiled down upon her reassuringly. "I shall treat you as I would a child, for the present. Will you obey me?"

"Yes," she replied. "If you will only help me to escape. Please let me tell you——"

"Not now," he said, raising one hand to stop her. "There is no time. At present we must act. You say that it is impossible for us to pass from here through the palace?"

"Utterly so."

"Then there remains only the way by the garden."

"That alone."

"Is there a gate through the wall to the street—anywhere?"

"There was one; but it has been securely locked ever since I was brought here."

The detective turned and again studied the countenance of his prisoner; but after a moment he shrugged his shoulders and turned away again; and he smiled, too, rather an unpleasant smile for the detective, for the eyes of Sela were open and staring at him now, with an expression that was half a sneer.

Calmly, and with deliberation, the detective fastened a bandage over the man's eyes; and then turning to the queen, he said to her:

"I had thought again of attempting to persuade this scoundrel, but I do not regard it as the best plan; and

now, as he can hear and will remember all that we might say to each other, I will ask you not to speak again unless I request you to do so."

She nodded her head and he turned away toward the curtains that she had pointed out to him as concealing a door which communicated with the palace proper.

It was true that the door was locked, as she had said; but locks held small terrors for Nick Carter, and, after examining this one a moment, he picked it as dexterously as a professional locksmith might have done.

Then he motioned to her to draw near, at the same time putting his fingers to his lips to indicate that he wished her not to speak at all.

He had opened the door noiselessly, and now, having drawn her through it to the other side, he returned to the room and crossed it to the electric switch, which he turned off, leaving the room in utter darkness.

Then he silently returned to the door where he had left the queen, as silently passed beyond it, as silently closed it after him, and without a sound of any kind, relocked it again, leaving his prisoner to the sole occupancy of the room they had left, and with himself and the queen, together, in the wide corridor which led—he knew not whither.

There were dim lights shining there, however, at infrequent distances, and by the aid of these he could see his way quite well.

Grasping the queen's arm, he led her forward, unresistingly, along the corridor, walking swiftly and silently until they came to another one that crossed it at right angles.

"Do you know the way through the palace?" the detective asked, coming to a pause.

"No better than you do," she replied. "During all the months that I have lived here, I have rarely been away from that part of the palace where you found me to-night. And when I have been permitted elsewhere, it has always been in the company of some person whom I hated; some guard who was watching me, or only under the eyes of those people here, who have kept me a prisoner."

"Hush!" whispered the detective suddenly. Then he drew her back sharply into the embrasure of a doorway, and they remained there while three men approached and passed them.

"The king!" she whispered in the detective's ear, as they drew near; and Nick nodded; but after they had gone, and had turned the corner of the corridor so that they passed out of sight and hearing, he drew her farther along the passage, until they were directly beneath one of the lights.

Then, as if she were a child, instead of a queen, he put his hand under her chin and raised it so that he could look down into her eyes.

"Tell me," he said slowly, "who those men were."

"The king," she replied, "the prime minister, and the ambassador from Spain."

"Let us refer only to the king," continued the detective, still holding her chin elevated so that he could look into her eyes. "Are you quite sure that one of those men who just passed us was the king?"

She nodded her head into the palm of his hand, while, with something like mischievousness in her tone, she replied:

"Quite."

"He is the man you married?" persisted Nick.

"Yes."

"In very truth, Mercedes?"

She drew away from him, wondering.

"Do you doubt me?" she demanded. "Why should you?"

"No; I do not doubt you; I only wish to be assured that you are making no mistake."

"Why? I do not understand."

"Mercedes, the first of the three men who passed us just now, and he whom you say was the king, your husband, *is not the King of Corazon.*"

"Do you mean that he is not my husband? That I have been deceived?" she almost cried out in affright.

"No; I mean that he is not the king. I knew the king well, child, when he was the crown prince. This man who just passed us is not he. There is a resemblance, but it is not the same man. If this one poses for the king, he is an imposter—and it is an imposition that I should think might have been easily discovered. What I wish to know now, *was this man the same one whom you married?—or did you marry the king, and have you been cruelly deceived since then?*"

"My God!" she exclaimed—and stopped.

Nick was silent, and presently she looked up at him with affrighted eyes, and murmured:

"I—do—not—know. Alas, I do not know. Oh, sir, be my savior, and take me from this awful place at once!" Then, without warning, she sank limp and senseless into his arms.

It has been said that they had withdrawn into the embrasure of a doorway; and now, as the queen fainted in his arms, Nick could hear other footsteps approaching them.

Discovery was almost certain now, if those approaching should pass that way, and on that side of the corridor, and, in desperation, the detective reached behind him and tried the handle of the door against which he was half leaning.

It turned in his grasp and the door opened.

Beyond it was a room that was dark to utter blackness; but it was a welcome haven at the moment, and Nick, with his burden in his arms, stepped through and closed the door after him.

The electric flash-light, which he was never without

was in his pocket, and producing it he pressed upon the button and shot the gleam of light around the room.

It was a small room, almost bare of furniture, save for a table and a few chairs and a rug upon the floor; evidently it was the anteroom to a larger apartment beyond: at all events, it was a present haven of refuge for them, and to render things doubly secure, the key was on the inside of the lock.

This Nick turned at once, and then he lifted his burden into one of the chairs.

She opened her eyes again almost at once, and with a little sigh looked up wonderingly at him.

"This is a night of strange adventures for both of us," he said to her in a whisper. "Do you think you have the courage to sit where you are and wait for me, while I look around a little and discover just where we are?"

She nodded her head.

"Yes," she said, "if you will promise not to desert me."

"I will not desert you," he made answer; and, then, leaving her there, he started across the small room toward another door that his light had revealed to him.

But ere he had taken three steps, she called him back to her side in sudden alarm.

"I know this room," she whispered to him. "Your light just now told me where we are. Yonder, through that door, is the private audience-room of the king. There is another entrance around the corridor, but I have been through this way."

"And what lies in that direction?" asked Nick, pointing toward the door at which he had directed his steps when she recalled him.

"I do not know," she replied, shaking her head in perplexity. "But yonder—that other room—the audience-room—that is where the king has taken the prime minister and the ambassador. There is only a partition wall between us. We must escape at once. They will find us here. They will arouse the guard. We will be captured, and, oh, the horror of it—now!"

"Wait," said the detective. "I must see what lies beyond this other door, and then I will return to you. Be patient, now, and be brave."

He left her, and crossing the room, tried the door; but it was locked.

He bent down to peer through the keyhole to ascertain if the key was in the opposite side, but there was no light beyond the door and he could not see.

Raising the flash-light to a level with the hole, he pressed the button.

Instantly he saw that there was no key in the lock on the opposite side—and he instantly learned that his presence there had been discovered, for a voice immediately called out from the other side of the door to him.

"Who is there?" the voice demanded to know; and when the detective did not reply, the question was repeated in a louder and a very angry tone.

Still, Nick Carter did not reply, and then he heard an exclamation of despair from beyond the door, followed by a sound which closely resembled a moan.

At the same instant Nick was conscious that the queen had approached him silently, and was standing beside him with bated breath.

He flashed his light upon her and saw that she was frightened—that her eyes were staring, and that she seemed scarcely conscious of her surroundings; but he realized that there was no time for asking questions just then, and he grasped her by the arm to draw her away, when, from the opposite of the door through which they had entered from the corridor, there came a sudden knocking.

"By Jove!" muttered the detective. "It would seem as if the whole palace was suddenly centering toward this spot!"

He drew the queen along with him nearer to the door, and listening, they could hear the half-repressed breathing of a man on the other side of it, who seemed to be straining to listen; as if he had pressed his face against the jamb of the door in order to hear the better.

They heard him mutter a curse under his breath, and then—the soft patter of his feet as he turned and sped away along the corridor.

"Now is our opportunity!" exclaimed the detective.

He turned the key in the lock, he threw open the door and pushed the queen through it in front of him, and then he closed and locked the door behind him, withdrawing the key and dropping in into his pocket.

"Come!" he said, then.

He seized her by one hand, and together they ran lightly along the corridor until they arrived at another one that crossed it. Here they turned, and again sped forward to a second crossing, where they turned again. Then on once more to a third turn, and then a fourth, until finally they ran down one corridor which was much narrower than the others.

They followed this one to the end, and the detective perceived, too late, that it ended abruptly at a wall—a blank wall, save for a small and narrow door set into the solid masonry; a door that was bound with brass and iron bands and braces.

And then, when Nick would have turned to retrace his steps, to seek another way of escape, this door flew open, and a man with a huge ring of keys swinging from one of his arms, stepped out directly in front of them.

Nick saw instantly that the man was as greatly startled at their appearance as they were at his; but he had not an instant to cry out, for Nick sprang upon him like lightning.

There was a convulsive rattle of keys, a smothered

exclamation, which died in the man's throat before it was uttered, and then under a terrific blow from the detective's fist, he sank back senseless and motionless to the stone floor.

CHAPTER X.

BRUTE VIGO, THE JAILER.

Nick Carter had the forethought to drag the senseless jailer through the narrow door—for jailer he evidently was, judging from his costume and the bunch of keys that swung from his arm; and he quickly closed and locked the door after them.

They were within a small room that was not more than ten feet square—evidently the watch-room for this man with the keys, who was now beginning to gasp with returning consciousness.

There was a rough cot at one side of the room, and Nick flung his captive upon that, while he motioned to the queen to seat herself upon one of the wooden chairs which stood beside it; and while consciousness was returning to the jailer, Nick deftly bound his hands behind his back and tied his ankles together, so he could give them no trouble later on—for the fellow was a powerful man of Herculean build.

Presently he opened his eyes and blinked at the detective; and his face seemed utterly expressionless until, at last, he turned them toward the queen.

Then, indeed, he lost his composure, for his jaw dropped, and he stared at her in open-mouthed amazement.

"The queen!" he managed to gasp.

"Yes," said Nick. "What of it?"

The jailer turned his eyes toward the detective, and his face took on an expression of sullen ferocity as he demanded:

"Who are you? I don't know you."

For reply, Nick leaned forward and plucked a poniard from the jailer's belt, and turning it about in his hand, he jabbed the point of it into the fleshy part of the man's leg.

A volume of curses, astounding to hear, came from the prostrate man, and when they had passed like a gust of wind, the detective said quietly:

"That will teach you to be respectful. I want you to be civil. We are in the passageway between the palace and the prison, here, are we not, and there is another way out, to which you hold the keys, is there not?"

The jailer preserved a sullen silence until Nick again jabbed the poniard into his flesh, eliciting another half scream and a second bunch of curses.

"You will know me presently," said the detective significantly.

"I know you now, curse you!" was the reply. "You are the man who escaped from in front of the hotel to-night—or last night. It is almost morning now. You shot my brother through the arm when he tried to stop you."

"Ah!" said Nick. "So much the better. What became of the young man who escaped with me?"

"He did not escape with you. He is in there, curse you both!" and the jailer jerked his thumb over his shoulder toward the prison.

"Good!" said Nick. "We will have him out presently. And General Calabria? What of him?"

"He was shot. Curse you, keep that poniard away from my leg and I will answer you. Do you take me for a pincushion or an Andalusian bull that you keep prodding me?"

"What of the general? Tell me that."

"He was shot, I tell you."

"Killed?"

"No; but he will not live. He is at the hospital."

"Is he well cared for?"

"Cared for? He has the priests around him. They have given him absolution. The people in the streets are crying for him. Yesterday they would have torn him limb from limb, but now they seek only the man who wounded him, to slay *him!*"

"That sounds well. The people are coming to their senses."

"Coming to their senses?" The man laughed loudly. "Say that they have lost them all, and you will guess nearer to the truth. They have filled the streets of the city with barricades. The soldiers are driving them from place to place at the points of bayonets. There is fighting everywhere, and not one of them knows for what he is fighting. They only seek to kill, kill, kill——"

He stopped suddenly, and his eyes blazed as he attempted to leap to his feet, only to fall back again upon the couch; but his gaze was directed at the queen, as he cried out madly:

"It is you, *you, you!!!* whom they wish to kill. You, who have brought our country to this pass. You, who have brought these demons of foreigners to our court to ruin our king and our country. You, who have been a curse to us all. You, *you, you!!!*"

The poor queen sank back almost unconscious under this tirade, but Nick reached out and touched her upon the shoulder.

"Courage, Mercedes!" he said. "It is evidently all a part with the mistakes that have been made." Then he turned again toward the jailer.

"Where is your king?" he demanded.

The man laughed wildly again.

"My king!" he cried out derisively. "*Our* king! We have no king—or, if we have, God alone knows where he is now. He is not here. He is not in the palace. He has not been here in the palace since that viper of a woman, who calls herself a queen, came here from Spain to live! He went away to marry her. He never came back. It

was a stranger—an impostor who returned here in his place. An impostor, I tell you! A stranger, I tell you! A man who was never king—who never could be king. It was all a conspiracy. Fools that we were that we did not see it then! Fools that we were that we did not hearken to the voice of Calabria! Fools that we were that we permitted ourselves to be turned against him, the best friend we ever had—the best friend the king ever had.

"Prod me with the knife, if you will! I do not care now. You may kill me, but I will have my say.

"She! That viper who calls herself a queen, has brought ruin to our country and our king. She drove Calabria out of the country, disgraced—and now she has killed him. She is the cause of the death of the general's son! She drove away Nerdinia, the princess, whom everybody loved, but who, thank God, is back again, and safe!"

"The princess!" cried Nick. "Nerdinia! Where is she?"

The man leered at him from his place on the couch.

"As if I would tell you that!" he cried out. "Prod me if you will! Drive the poniard through my heart, but I will not betray her again."

"And the man who was with her?" demanded Nick, thinking of Chick. "What of him?"

"Him? The American? He had his throat cut, so they told me, and was thrown to the fishes. He was but another like you, I think. He would have fallen into the wiles of the viper queen and have been——"

The man ceased suddenly and his jaw dropped in amazement as the queen rose quietly in her place and stepped close to his side.

There was a knife hanging in a sheath against the wall, and she reached up and drew it out. Then, without an instant of hesitation, she severed the bonds which held the jailer a prisoner—cut them all, so that he was free, and turning the knife about so that the handle was toward him, she dropped it into his hands.

"Listen to me," she said quietly, looking down into his bloodshot eyes; and he fumbled at the hilt of the knife, and obeyed her, licking his lips as if he did not know what to say or do, or what to make of her act.

"Listen," she repeated. "What you say about me is all untrue. I have known nothing of these things. I know who you are now, for I have heard the captain of the guard——"

"Viper!" he shrieked out; but she held up one hand and he was silent.

"I have heard him speak of you as the Brute Vigo, the jailer. Well, you are Vigo. These stories that you have heard about me are untrue. I tell you these things in order that you may go out from here and tell the people that the whom they call the viper queen, was never the viper they thought her. She was only a poor, wronged girl, who was imposed upon by an impostor, just as they have been. Vigo, listen to me. I had never once seen your king when they brought him to me as my prospective husband. After that, in three days, we were married. It was all at court, at my own home, among my own people. I could not know that he was an impostor. I could not know that he was not your king, but only a masquerader who had been imposed upon me and upon my people by a set of conspirators, whose ingenuity is greater than Satan's—I could not know that.

"I doubt, Vigo, if your king has ever left this palace. I know now—I did not know it until an hour ago, but I know it now—that Juan II. is not my husband; that I am not your queen; that I am not the Queen of Corazon. Cannot you see how it is that I have been fooled and wronged even more than you? Even more than the people of Corazon?

"Do not you see what these conspirators have done? They took an Austrian cousin of his who resembles him, just as the Prince of Wales resembles the Czar of Russia; they dressed him up as the king; his retainers and suite were in the conspiracy; they substituted one for the other. How should my father know the difference? How should I know the difference? How should anybody have known the difference when every person who could have told of the plot and of the imposture was deep in the conspiracy?

"There was no one to tell the truth to you when he returned here to this court! You discovered the difference in the two men, and you laid that difference at my door—and all the while, Vigo, it was I who was the wronged one; it was I who was suffering; it was I who was kept a prisoner here in the palace; I who was suffered to see nobody to tell them that their king could scarcely speak his own language."

She wheeled suddenly and pointed toward the detective.

"To-night," she said, "this gentleman has many times saved my life; he has done more, for he has saved my honor and my self-respect as well. To-night, as we fled through the corridors of the palace, we saw pass us, the man who calls himself the king; and it was he—this man here, who has prodded you with your own poniard to force you to tell the truth to him—he it was who told me that the man we saw was *not* the king.

"He knew the truth—this gentleman knew it, for he once knew the crown prince before he became king. And when he told me, it all became plain to me at once. I saw through it all, at that moment, or within a very few moments afterward. I remembered having heard whispers of this same conspiracy. I recalled things that had been said to me during the months that I have lived in this palace, a queen and a prisoner. I saw it all. This

gentleman knew, and he told me; and having that much light, I saw all that remained.

"Now, Vigo, you have the knife in your hand. If you do not believe me, and if you cannot make others believe that what I have told you is true, *kill me.* I had rather be dead than to have it thought for a moment that I had any part in the awful conspiracy which is now as plain to my senses as is that light yonder to my eyes. Kill me, if you do not believe!"

During all this long speech, Vigo sat on the couch, fondling the hilt of the knife, and blinking at her like a bull watching the approach of the banderilleros. Now and then he shifted his eyes to Nick's face, but they always returned to hers.

When she finished, he rose slowly to his feet, and dashing the knife upon the stone floor with all his strength, shivered it into bits. Then he dropped upon his knees before her and seizing the hem of her gown, he raised it to his lips.

"God grant that you will pardon me, your majesty," he murmured.

"Hush!" she said. "I am not your queen. I never was your queen. I am a wife, but no queen. I have been dishonored in purpose, but not in fact. Still I am not a queen."

"Aye," mumbled Vigo. "That is perhaps so. My brain is not equal to it all. But you should have been my queen. Slow as my brain is, I see it all now. I understand all the mysteries that have happened here. I know now why he who has called himself the king, has been different since his marriage—it is because he was not the king."

Suddenly he stopped and leaped to his feet. Then he flung his arms above his head, and cried out:

"But where is the king? Where is he, I say? Have they murdered him? If he is not here, then where is he? Where is he?"

"Vigo," said Nick, interposing, "I believe that I can tell where he is. I believe that I can take you to him. We—this lady and I—found to-night where there was a prisoner confined in one of the rooms of the palace, and I verily believe that prisoner to be the king."

Vigo brandished both arms over his head, and cried out:

"Then by all the saints of Terra del Corazon, we will have him out of there!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE RETURN OF THE PRINCESS.

Vigo would have rushed at once to the door; he would have dashed beyond it into the palace; he would, indeed, have attacked single-handed all those who had conspired against his king and his country.

But Nick Carter still held possession of the keys; and also he leaped in front of the giant.

"Wait, Vigo," he commanded in that voice which all who heard it, obeyed. "There is yet ample time for the work we have to do. The night is young yet."

"Yes, your worship," replied the giant humbly. "I am overimpetuous. I am headstrong. Tell me what to do, and I will do it."

"Tell me first," said Nick, "do you forgive me the blow I struck you?"

"The blow? I have forgotten it; and you did well to strike me; also, there is not another man in the country who could have knocked me senseless and bound me. I am a simple man, sir; I am only a jailer, here, but I am also champion of the kingdom, for I win it each year at the tournaments; and as such, I am honored above my deserts. The men of the army know me; the people know me; it is my pride that they love me. Command me, sir, and I will serve you for my king's sake, for my country's sake and for this lady's sake, as long as there is breath in my body."

"First, then, be patient."

"Aye, sir."

"Now, tell me of the Princess Nerdinia. Where is she?"

"Here, sir, in this prison—but she is not a prisoner. It is only for her own safety that she is here. Over in the prison yard, at the other end of the building, there is a cottage, where I live with my good wife. The Princess Nerdinia is there."

"And she is safe and unharmed?"

"Perfectly safe, señor."

"And the gentleman who came with her"—Nick faltered a little in asking this question—"you told me that his throat was cut and that——"

"Nay, sir; I said that I was told so. But I do not believe it; nor does she."

"Then where is he?"

"I do not know. The princess will tell you about it all."

"We will go to her. We will take this lady to her and we will leave them together."

"Aye, sir."

"But first tell me of that other young man; of the one who tried to escape with me when I shot your brother through the arm," added the detective, smiling.

Vigo hung his head for a moment; then he said humbly:

"My brother will forgive you that—as I do, and as I crave forgiveness for having misjudged you. As for the young man—he is a prisoner here in my charge. Follow me, sir, if you will be so good."

Nick gave Vigo his keys, and then with Mercedes beside him, they followed the man into the prison and along a silent corridor for a considerable distance, at

last passing out through a little door into the yard; and here they presently arrived at the cottage to which Vigo had referred.

The time was now nearly two in the morning, but for all that, the cottage was alight.

"This is a night of excitement," Vigo explained, as they approached the cottage. "The streets of the city are alive with armed men. It is a conspiracy against conspirators. I, and my two brothers, and the officers who were loyal to General Calabria are the leaders of the men who have revolted. When you met me and knocked me down, I was on my secret way into the palace to learn of the whereabouts of three men. Then I was to return here and report—and after that I was to admit the men of mine to the palace through the prison."

"And those three men you searched for—who were they?"

"He who calls himself the king; the prime minister, and the ambassador from Madrid."

"Good," said Nick. "I know where they are. I will take you to them."

"In this cottage," continued Vigo, "Nerdinia awaits us. It was our plan to depose the king—unless he came to his senses—and to install her as queen regent. Ah, sir, it is the mercy of God that you came in time to prevent much bloodshed, for it will be prevented now."

"How, Vigo?" It was Mercedes who asked the question.

"Because this false king will have no followers. When I tell what I now know, those who would have fought for him, for the sake of loyalty to the crown, will fall away from him like rain-drops from a shaking bough. There will be no battle now. We have but to capture the false king, and to set at liberty the real one."

As he ceased speaking, he opened the door of the cottage and stalked inside, followed by Nick and the worthwhile queen.

The room which they entered was filled with armed men—officers, most of them were, of the army, who had been faithful through all the trying time, to their general.

They started forward as Vigo entered the room, but the shout of welcome that was upon their lips died there when they saw the queen, who paused hesitatingly upon the threshold. There was a murmur of disapproval from some of them, but Vigo raised his hand and enjoined silence.

"My friends," he said, speaking simply and going straight to the point, "listen to a short tale I have to tell. You all know how the crown of Spain resents the independence of the Kingdom of Corazon; you know how many years Spain has striven to place the yoke of subservience around our necks."

"Yes," they replied to him.

"In the proposed marriage of our king to the Princess Mercedes, the political conspirators of Spain saw their opportunity. Listen now, and you will understand it as well as I."

"We listen."

"You have all heard of the Count of Thenault, of Austria, who resembles our king, even as the Prince of Wales resembles the Czar of Russia. Some of you have seen this count; many of you know about that resemblance between the king and the count.

"When our king went to Spain to wed the Princess Mercedes, his retainers and courtiers—his entire suite—was selected by General Fernando, the arch-conspirator, and there was not one among them who was not in his pay; and so it was that on the journey to his bride, or even before the start was made, our king was made a prisoner and the count was installed in his stead.

"Thus it was that they went to Spain; thus it was that Mercedes became the wife of the count instead of the king, believing all the while that she was wedding with the king; thus it was that even the members of her own family were deceived, for who should guess the fraud when the men who surrounded the false king were doing reverence to him all the time?

"And so the marriage was solemnized; so the false king, accompanied by the bride, who knew nothing of his treachery, returned to this country, this court, and this palace.

"You all know how different it was with us the moment the false king began to reign.

"Our king was not the same. We knew it, but we could not assign a cause. Seeking one, we attributed it to the marriage; we laid every fault at the door of the queen."

"Aye!" they shouted, now.

"We deemed ourselves wronged," continued Vigo. "Think for a moment how deeply she has been wronged. Since her arrival in this country, only a few months ago, she has been a prisoner. When we have seen her, she has been under guard, without our knowing it, and her life was in momentary danger.

"In your memories, go back over all that has happened during these few months. Remember how General Calabria was treated, how he was placed in prison here, how he was driven from his own country, and how he finally returned here, only to be shot down before our eyes."

A groan of execration went up from every throat.

"Friends, I call upon you to do homage to the woman who would have been our queen but for the machinations of those conspirators. I call upon you——"

A door at the opposite side of the room opened, and Nerdinia, the princess, stood on the threshold. It was she who interrupted Vigo.

"It is I who call upon you to do as I do!" she cried; and then she crossed the room and dropped upon her knees before Mercedes and kissed her hand.

But when the men there would have done the same, Mercedes drew back hastily.

"No, no, no!" she cried. "I am not your queen. I never was your queen. I have been as great an impostor as the man I married, although I was innocent of wrong. That you will forgive me is all I ask. Homage I will not receive. That is due from you to this dear princess—to Nerdinia."

Nick Carter thought it was time to interrupt the proceedings.

He stepped into the center of the room, and, waving them all aside, he said:

"Vigo has not told you who I am, or why I am here. It was not necessary. But now we waste time. In the palace behind us is the false king, now in consultation with his chief advisers—the prime minister and the ambassador from Madrid. We must go there without delay."

"Aye," they shouted. "Aye, aye!!"

"There, also, in one of the rooms of the palace, I think you will find your king, a prisoner.

"It is strange that they have not murdered him before now, but I think he lives. Still, we have no time to waste, for there is one whom I have already made a prisoner of mine, who, if he escapes, will fly to his fellow conspirators and will spread the truth of what has happened since I entered this palace. I refer to Lieutenant Sela."

"Curse him!" they shouted.

"Curse him if you like," said Nick, smiling, "but he is a worm that will sting, once he gets his hands free, and the first sting he would give would be the murder of your king."

The detective turned then to Vigo.

"Vigo," he said, "select from among these men, those who will go outside, among the throngs in the streets, and proclaim the truth to them in such a manner that it will have the desired effect; then——"

He stopped suddenly, and everybody bent their heads to listen, for at that instant there came a loud peal upon the prison bell.

With a simple command to wait, Vigo turned away and was gone; but after a few moments he returned, and there was the suggestion of a smile upon his grim visage, as he said:

"There was a man outside, brought here by half-a-dozen soldiers, who claimed audience with the Princess Nerdinia. I have brought him hither."

He stepped aside from the doorway, and Chick sprang into the room.

In an instant Nick had seized him by both hands, and was shaking them with joy.

"You have escaped," he said to his assistant. "It is enough for the present that you are here and that you are safe. For the rest, I can hear it another time."

He turned to the giant jailer again, and added:

"Now, Vigo, bring me that young man who tried to escape with me——"

"He is here, your honor. I sent for him as soon as we entered the cottage."

The big jailer threw open another door, and Patsy rushed through it and almost cast himself into the arms of his chief.

"Now," exclaimed the detective, "we are, indeed, ready to proceed. Vigo!"

"Yes, señor."

"With these two assistants of mine, and four or five of your own chosen men, with yourself, we will now proceed to the palace. The others you must send out as escort to the men in the streets."

Vigo stepped forward again into the center of the room. Then, more by noise, he called off the men he wanted and gave each his instructions what he was to do, and how to do it; and while he was thus employed, the detective and Chick turned to the princess and the deposed queen.

"I was treated roughly, but not badly, after they captured me," Nerdinia told them. "I was brought back here to pass the remainder of my life in an asylum, for it was feared that if I was at liberty I would apply to one of the courts of Europe for aid. I am quite happy now, for I have learned that Eulogio Calabria is recovering, and I know that all this terror here in my country will soon be past."

Vigo approached them at that moment, and, saluting, he said:

"Señor, we are ready now, to go to the palace."

CHAPTER XII.

THE FIGHT FOR A THRONE.

They were eight determined men who made their way silently through the prison yard from the cottage to the little door where the detective had encountered the Goliath of the prison.

Vigo quite naturally took the lead, for the way was familiar to him; but Nick Carter came next, and close behind him were Chick, then Patsy, and then the four others whom Vigo had selected to accompany them.

They passed through the little door into the prison, and then on again through the corridors of the palace, for Vigo had been told that their destination was the anteroom to the private audience chamber of the king—and it will be remembered that Nick Carter still had the key to that small, bare room, in his pocket.

The palace seemed deserted.

Everywhere, the corridors were empty. There were times when they heard footfalls, and twice they could hear voices; but they all knew that the men of the palace guard—at least, such of them as remained loyal to the false king—were on duty at the approaches, and were prepared to resist attack from the outside, never dreaming that the assault would come from the direction of the prison.

At last, as silently as so many cats, they passed before the door to the small room where Nick Carter and Mercedes had concealed themselves, but Nick reached out a restraining hand and touched Vigo's shoulders.

"Your four men," he whispered, "under the command of my assistant, Chick, must pass around to the other corridor, and stand guard over the main entrance to the audience chamber."

"Aye," replied Vigo; and he whispered the order to them.

"They are to make no assault upon it," continued the detective, "but are to prevent the escape of any person; and if any one approaches from the outside, he is to be made prisoner, and held."

"Aye."

"That is all; otherwise, they are to remain outside the door until further orders."

"Aye."

"You, and Patsy, and I will enter here."

Vigo waved his hand, and the four men, led by Chick, hastened away around the corner of the corridor; and when there had been sufficient time allowed for them to reach the door where they were to stand guard, Nick Carter placed his key silently in the lock before him, and turned it.

The room was as dark as it had been that other time he had entered it, accompanied by Mercedes, but his electric flash quickly lighted the way for them, and they crossed at once toward the second door, from beyond which the voice had called to the detective—that is, Nick and Vigo approached it, while Patsy was sent to the other door, which gave into the audience-room, there to stand guard until they called to him.

And now the detective tapped boldly upon the door behind which he supposed there was a prisoner confined.

At first there was no reply; but when he tapped a second time, a surly voice demanded to know who was there.

It was not the same voice that had asked the question before; but, nevertheless, the detective replied instantly:

"Open!"

There was a moment of delay, some grumbling, and then the noise of a chain being dropped; then the door opened a crack—but that was enough.

Instantly Nick and Vigo together hurled themselves against the door, sending it open with a rush, and throwing the man who had stood behind it clear across the room and into a heap on the floor.

As Vigo leaped forward and threw himself upon the prostrate man, Nick ran his hands along the sides of the casing of the door in search of the electric switch.

He found it and turned it, sending a flood of light over the apartment.

Vigo, who had been choking his man into silence, and who had used his mighty strength to more purpose than he supposed, for he had broken the fellow's neck, leaped to his feet when the lights were turned on, and uttering a cry like the moan of a bullock, precipitated himself upon his knees beside a bed upon which a tall, dark, Van Dyke-bearded man was leaning forward as far as the chains which bound him to the wall would permit; for there were small steel chains almost in the form of a network upon the man, and they held him around his arms and neck and waist, and ran thence to staples driven in the wall.

"Sire!" cried Vigo. "My king! My liege! My master! We have found you at last!"

"Yes, Vigo," replied the king, smiling weakly, but bravely, "after five months. It is a wonder that I am not quite dead, is it not? But who is this man with you, Vigo? Ah! Come closer, sir, if you please. You see that I cannot move from this bed. Unless I greatly err, you are—you are——"

"Yes?" said the detective, smiling back at him.

"Nicholas Carter!" exclaimed the king. "Calabria must have sought you! Or Nerdinia."

But Vigo had leaped to his feet again.

With his strong hands he seized upon the chains that bound his king to the wall, and snapped them between his fingers as if they had been silken strands; and so the king was presently free, save for the circlets of chain wet his neck, and wrists, and waist.

When Vigo would have torn these away, also, by the mere strength of his fingers, the king smiled down upon him, and said:

"Leave them where they are, Vigo, for the present. Had I possessed a tithe of your strength, I might have removed them long ago. My clothing is in that cupboard, Vigo. Give it to me and I will dress more presentably."

While he was adjusting his clothing, he kept up a running fire of talk, during which he thanked the detective again and again for what he had done; and also told him of all that had happened to him since his imprisonment in his own palace, and how it came about.

"It was not enough for my cousin that he should steal my kingdom, he had also to rob me of my bride. And he comes here daily and boasts of it to my face. Each day he has told me that the next one would be my last—but he has not dared to murder me.

"And Vigo, you and my good general never knew—I knew that you did not know. They made me a prisoner here in my own palace before ever the bridal party started for Spain. I have never left this room since that time. That fellow yonder, whom Vigo has killed, I see, has been my jailer. He deserved a broken neck, the rascal!"

One would have thought, to hear the king talk, that he was merely entertaining guests, notwithstanding the fact that he was so weak from the long confinement that he could scarcely stand, and had to be assisted by the detective and Vigo, to don his clothing.

But at last it was accomplished; and then he turned smilingly to the detective, and said:

"What next, Mr. Carter?"

"If your majesty will follow me now," replied Nick; and he turned away without completing the sentence.

But the king, supported on the powerful arm of Vigo, followed him; and so they crossed the small, bare anteroom to the door at the opposite end of it, where Patsy was still on guard.

"One of my assistants." Nick whispered in the ear of the king; and the latter placed a kindly hand upon the young assistant's head, smiling at him.

"They are inside that room," said Patsy to his chief. "I can hear them talking."

The detective nodded and strode past Patsy to the door. Then he seized upon it, and throwing it open, leaped through to the inside of the audience chamber.

It was a big, square room, brilliantly lighted and sumptuously furnished; and as the detective entered, three men who were there leaped to their feet and confronted him.

But the foremost of them—the false king it was, too—started back in amazement when he beheld the forms of the real king and of Vigo in the doorway.

"So!" he cried. Then, instantly perceiving that he and his two friends had only this stranger, and Vigo, and the king—who was too weak to stand steadily on his feet—to deal with, he drew his rapier from the scabbard at his side, and leaped forward, attempting to pass the detective, and thus to reach the king and kill him.

But Nick Carter saw the intention in time.

He also leaped forward, and with an upward blow, sent the rapier flying out of his hand into the air; but when Nick would have seized upon the Austrian count, the latter eluded him and sprang away again, rejoining his friends.

He was as agile on his feet as a monkey.

As he leaped back, he seized the sword from the hand of the ambassador from Madrid, and turned to face the detective who had already picked up the rapier he had dropped, and was now pursuing him.

Vigo, in the meantime, had calmly drawn a revolver, and had raised it to a level. He was about to fire when Nick perceived him, and called out:

"Wait, Vigo, wait! Shoot either of the other two

who raises a hand, but let me deal with this fellow. It is a fight for a throne, now!"

The Count of Thenault smiled sardonically. To do him justice, he was no coward, and he knew himself to be a superb swordsman.

"I do not know who you are—unless you are the American," he called out calmly, and smilingly, "but whoever you are, I will kill you; and if Vigo but holds his fire—then after you, the others. On guard!"

Nick Carter was in no mood for dallying. He attacked the count like a cyclone, and from the first forced him backward, step by step, until the combat became little more than a running race around the room.

So fast and so furious was the play of swords that soon the detective had the count gasping for breath—when, suddenly, the latter, perceiving that there was little or no hope for him, shortened his rapier like a dagger in his hand, and stooping, leaped under the detective's guard.

But he had calculated wrongly; he had not realized the quickness of Nick Carter's arm—and instead of swinging his own body under the detective's weapon, he flung it squarely against the point of it, so that it pierced him through and through until the point of the rapier protruded from his back between his shoulders.

He went to the floor without a sound or a moan, and rolled over—dead; and Nick flung down his own weapon and turned away.

"Too bad," was the comment. "I meant only to disarm him in order that you might hang him at your leisure, your majesty, but he flung himself against my sword; he killed himself."

* * * * * * *

At sunrise that morning the bells pealed out all over the city, calling throngs to the great throne-room of the palace which was capable of accommodating five thousand souls; and those who could not enter, thronged outside the palace, listening to chosen speakers, who related to them the wonderful truths about the conspiracy against their king and country.

It is needless to say that there had been no more fighting in the streets after the information was sent out to the populace by Vigo's men.

In the great throne-room, the nobles of the kingdom, the generals of the army, and the chosen ones of the country were assembled; and upon a litter beside the throne itself, was the form of old General Calabria, of whom it was now said that he would live to command the army again.

The king, in a voice that was remarkably strong, considering the privations he had endured, addressed them all from the throne; and the people who listened, smiled upon him through tears, and cheered until the palace rang with their voices.

"And now, my people," the king said to them in closing, "I have a pleasant duty to perform if you will be patient with me."

He turned and in a moment led Mercedes forward so that she stood beside him; and when the cheering had subsided, he said:

"Behold your future queen! We will right her wrongs even as she has helped to right ours. We were betrothed to each other, and the man who stole my crown, stole, also, my bride. He is dead, but the king lives, and Mercedes will be your queen!"

"Long live the king! Long live the queen!" they shouted in reply.

"And still one word more," said the king; and he turned again and drew Nerdinia toward him, standing her on the other side of him.

"Across the water, in America, there is a loyal subject of the crown, wounded almost unto death in defense of my sister. Nerdinia has asked me to give him to her for husband, and I have pledged my royal word to her that it shall be so, since the prince to whom she was wedded, but to whom she was never a wife, is dead."

Again there were cheers; and at the end of them the king added:

"And now, throughout Uarapa and the kingdom of Corazon, there shall be a week of rejoicing. Pardons will be granted to offenders who are worthy, and we will all make joy together."

THE END.

The next issue—No. 487—of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY, will contain "The House of Skeletons; or, Nick Carter's Greatest Find."

About the Early Numbers of

Tip Top Weekly

We receive hundreds of letters every week from readers asking if we can supply the early numbers of Tip Top containing Frank's adventures. In every case we are obliged to reply that numbers 1 to 300 are entirely out of print.

We would like to call the attention of our readers to the fact that the Frank Merriwell Stories now being published in book form in the Medal Library are facsimiles of these early numbers. The first book to appear was No. 150 entitled "Frank Merriwell's Schooldays."

We give herewith a complete list of all the stories that have been published in book form up to the time of writing. We will be glad to send a five colored cover catalogue of the Medal Library which is just filled with good things for boys, upon receipt of a one-cent stamp to cover postage.

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